

(RE)WRITING THE BODY IN PAIN:  
EMBODIED WRITING AS A DECOLONIZING METHODOLOGICAL PRACTICE

by

Susan Mary Ferguson

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Graduate Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
University of Toronto

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**Master of Arts, 2011**  
**Susan Mary Ferguson**  
**Graduate Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education**  
**University of Toronto**

**Abstract**

This thesis explores the possibilities of embodied writing for social inquiry. Using an examination of the social production of bodily pain to exemplify my approach, and drawing upon autobiographical writing, I develop an embodied writing practice and theorize its implications for decolonizing knowledge production. Following a phenomenologically informed interpretive sociology, I attend closely to language and the construction of meaning through reflexive engagement with pain as a social phenomenon. I also utilize mindfulness meditative practice methodologically to centre the body within social research and intervene in the mind/body split which underwrites much Western knowledge production and reproduces normative, medicalized relations to bodily knowledge. I suggest that by undoing those traditional boundaries demarcating the possibilities of knowledge production, and attending to our epistemological locations which are themselves deeply political, we might generate differently imagined relations to embodiment.

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## Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Autobiography: A Beginning.....	6
Chapter 3: Reading the Body in Pain.....	19
Mapping Pain and its Representation in Medicine.....	21
Storying Pain: The (De)Medicalization of Pain in Social Accounts of the Body.....	26
Epistemological Implications.....	32
Chapter 4: Writing Bodies: A Phenomenology of Writing.....	36
Phenomenology and the Body in Social Research.....	37
Writing Through Disability.....	39
Writing as a Social Practice.....	43
Implications for Writing.....	50
Chapter 5: (Re)Writing the Body in Pain: Towards the Possibility of an Embodied Methodology.....	53
Mindfulness Meditative Practice as Method.....	56
Imagined Bodies: An Excerpt from Lee Maracle’s Daughters are Forever.....	60
Mindful Bodies: An Excerpt From Lata Mani’s Interleaves.....	63
Beyond Painful Bodies: My Embodied Narrative.....	67
Towards the Possibility of an Embodied Methodology.....	70
Chapter 6: Epilogue.....	74
Bibliography.....	77

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Pain is an extraordinarily common, yet varied human experience. It is one way that our bodies communicate with us, and is present in our language, appearing often in daily life and conversation as a metaphor for that which is difficult or undesirable. Pain is the object of medical knowledge and practice, and a commodity of the medical-pharmaceutical-industrial complex. Pain is also an emotional experience, and is used often as a narrative device in the stories we tell about the world. Pain appears in film, media and advertising; in books ranging from fiction and memoir to medical texts and popular health books; in doctor's offices and clinic waiting rooms; and in medical charts, questionnaires and test reports. If we look and listen carefully, we will notice pain all around us.

And yet, pain is also nowhere. We feel it, but we often do not talk about it and we generally wish it would go away. It cannot be objectively seen or measured and it regularly evades explanation and resolution by medicine, which subsequently seeks to suppress it. Pain destroys language, or so it has been said, and thus while pain is often evoked metaphorically, it is much less often described. We avoid pain, have difficulty acknowledging pain and often retreat in the face of the pain of others.

And so, pain is both here and not here. An integral part of our daily lives as embodied beings, and also a space of silence and absence. Despite the very common experience of pain, it is most often narrated as a sign of anomaly, concern, even crisis – requiring and yet defying explanation. This interplay between the presence and absence of pain is revealing because it suggests that pain is a socially produced phenomenon, always already in story, part of an

ongoing and incomplete relation to embodiment. As Brian Pronger writes, of absence and the work it does:

Absence lies before presence, in anticipation. Just as absence lies in the foreground of presence, so too presence lies in the anticipation of absence...Absence must receive presence, or there will be no making present. (2002, p. 80)

Pain is thus made and unmade through the conditions and locations of its appearance; the absence of pain grounds, indeed constitutes, its presence while the presence of pain desires its absence. The commonsensical understanding of pain as troublesome and undesirable needs, then, to be understood through an analysis of the conditions of possibility enabling its appearance to reveal both how it works as a socially produced phenomenon and the work it is doing.

The subject of pain, and the painful experience, has generated some discussion within the social sciences – particularly within disability studies, sociology and medical anthropology – and humanities, where there is an emerging “pain studies” subdiscipline (Stoddard Holmes & Chambers, 2005, p. 133). And yet, at the same time, pain itself remains largely under-theorized and quite taken-for-granted as a medicalized phenomenon. When my own experiences of bodily pain intersected sharply with my scholarly work on embodiment and pedagogy, I became interested in the ways that much of the knowledge produced about pain conceals the social practices and interpretive relations which constitute the experience of bodily pain, thus rendering it a feeling or sensation that seems stripped of its social locatedness. I have come to understand this is as a kind of discursive disciplining of bodies in pain, and it is this disciplining that I hope to contest in the work that follows.

Pain is sensory. It is felt. And while deeply social, as I will show, it is typically understood to be experienced and interpreted at the level of the individual. The work of revealing



the sociality of pain and contesting dominant practices of knowledge production about pain thus required working *through* pain as a sensory experience. I needed, then, to develop a methodology capable of intervening in dominant bodily relations to knowledge production such that I could begin to experience, understand and, eventually, write the body differently than I had before. Beginning with the understanding that writing is a key component of social research methodology (Richardson, 2004), I wanted to find a way through those academic writing practices which typically rest upon a normative, and often disembodied relationship to text, towards an embodied writing practice that engages more fully with the breadth of sensory experience and embodied difference. From this perspective, my thesis explores the possibilities of embodied writing for social inquiry. Using an examination of the social production of bodily pain to exemplify my approach, I develop an embodied writing practice and theorize its implications for decolonizing knowledge production.

My approach is grounded in embodiment – my own embodiment – and draws upon feminist autobiographical, autoethnographic and narrative social science research methods. Following a phenomenologically informed interpretive sociology, I attend closely to language and the construction of meaning through reflexive engagement with social phenomena – I attempt to show the analytical work I am doing as I do it. I also utilize a variety of bodywork practices, and mindfulness meditative practice in particular, as a way to both ground my work in an embodied practice and intervene in biomedical discourses which typically inform and contain knowledge production about pain. Through my emphasis on the methodological potential of mindfulness meditative practice, I imbricate the body within social research; this is not only significant methodologically, but also politically. Given the traditional demarcation between mind and body in the Western philosophical tradition, and the emphasis on Western conceptions

of the body within most social theories of embodiment, my use of mindfulness meditative practice seeks to contribute to a wider project of decolonizing knowledge production. I suggest that by undoing those traditional boundaries demarcating knowledge production, and attending to our epistemological locations which are themselves always deeply political, we might open up opportunities to generate differently imagined relations to embodiment.

In this thesis, I trace my development of an embodied writing practice through a series of narrative reflections that, taken together, form a wider narrative of my consideration of living, working and writing with and through bodily pain. I begin with a brief autobiographical narrative that represents an entry point into this thesis research, and which helps to locate my project politically and methodologically at the intersections of feminist theory, anti-racism and disability studies scholarship. In the next chapter, I use an interpretive sociological approach to analyze the textual representation of bodily pain within different literatures as a way of both mapping the discursive boundaries of Western theories of pain and revealing that, despite its dominant characterization as a biological, individual and private sensation, pain is in fact profoundly social – always already an interpretive experience. I argue that even many social accounts of pain which seek to resist the medicalization of pain experiences ultimately reproduce scientific, objectivist relations to embodiment and bodily pain through a taken-for-granted understanding of pain as a biological sensation.

Given the methodological limits of critique that relies upon normative relations to bodily knowledge production, in the next chapter I turn my attention to writing itself and explore the epistemological consequences of (re)imagining dominant relations between disability, embodiment and writing. Finally, I close with an examination of three narrative excerpts of embodied writing that each in different ways resist the medicalization of bodily experience and

instead reveal the multiplicity, diversity and contingency of bodily life. Throughout this thesis, I raise considerations for how embodied writing can support a project of decolonizing knowledge production through the recognition of embodied difference and the cultivation of different ways of knowing.

## Chapter 2: Autobiography: A Beginning

Writing is a deep practice. Even before we begin writing, during whatever we are doing – gardening or sweeping the floor – our book or essay is being written deep in our consciousness. To write a book, we must write with our whole life, not just during the moments we are sitting at our desks.

Thich Nhat Hanh

During my first semester of graduate school, I took a course on embodied learning with Roxana Ng, now my thesis supervisor. One of the course requirements was that we keep a journal, comprised of both responses to the course readings and reflections upon our experience of the Qi Gong practice that was central to the course curriculum. In one of my final journal entries, I wrote that I would have liked a more explicit anti-racist theoretical framework through which to engage with course content. While my comment was intended to highlight the importance of politicizing knowledge production when learning about indigenous health and healing systems, it also betrays the limitations of my perspective at the time – that is, the extent to which my understanding of anti-racism was located within the realm of an activist-academic approach which privileges the mind and intellect, often at the expense (or erasure) of our bodies, and bodily knowledge.

In her response, Roxana acknowledged my critique, but made a political assertion of her own. She wrote back to me, “I believe that profound shifts must come from self-reflection and interrogation, not just from intellectual understanding.”<sup>1</sup> While I agreed with her about the

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<sup>1</sup> This comment was written in the margins of my course paper (January, 2005). This is also an example of the sociality of academic writing, a point I take up in more detail later in this thesis. While academic conventions typically only acknowledge this dialogic character of writing within the footnotes or acknowledgements, I attempt to

importance of self-reflection and interrogation, I understood these as primarily intellectual activities, and I recall insisting (to myself) that we need theory, discussion, *analysis* if we are to do our politics properly. Roxana was suggesting a different kind of reflection and interrogation, however, one that calls into question the very foundations of knowledge production.

Despite my initial hesitation, Roxana's response took up residence in my mind and imagination, and several years later, I realized that I understood what she meant. It was a slow, subtle coming to understanding. And, while there was indeed a moment of conscious realization, this consciousness needed many other moments in anticipation of this recognition that I understood something differently than I had before. Rereading my journal entries from the course, it is clear that despite my interest in exploring different ways of understanding the body, and the relationship between the body and knowledge production, I was struggling with those aspects of the course that required me to engage with my *own* body at an experiential level and my reflections tended to return again and again to theory drawn from course readings.<sup>2</sup>

It took several years of engagement with a variety of bodywork practices – which share among them an attentiveness to the different layers and dimensions of bodily life – to fully experience the significance of Roxana's assertion that personal and social transformation are intertwined processes which cannot be accomplished through analysis alone. Through working with a chronic pain condition, and holding this embodied process in conversation with the work of theorizing the body in knowledge production, I came to a deep awareness of how body and culture are fully imbricated; how history in its many manifestations lodges itself in the body. As

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reveal the social conditions of writing's emergence throughout this thesis by calling attention to it within the analysis itself.

<sup>2</sup> I wrote, for example, that I was finding it difficult to sustain a daily Qi Gong practice and I used theory from course readings to make sense of both my bodily reactions to the Qi Gong exercises and the pain in my arms and neck that I was beginning to experience more persistently at the time.

I learned to attend to my body and expand the frameworks I was using to understand the nature of pain, as well as bodily life in general, I also discovered that our epistemological locations matter a great deal. This notion of location, and a concern with how we orient ourselves towards bodily knowledge and experience, became a key theme in this work.

The reflections I have shared so far are just one possible entry point of many that I might have selected. After all, as Thomas King (2003) reminds us, human life is ultimately no more or no less than the stories we tell to make sense of our world and our experiences – there are many stories available to us, all of the time. However, I like the narrative above because it suggests that embodiment is indeed a “critical methodological opportunity” for learning about the nature of subjectivity and experience (Csordas, 1994, p. 4). Significantly, my story also points to the *political* opportunity offered by acknowledging the inseparability of the body and knowledge production, in spite of a long history in Western philosophy of treating the body as an object to be investigated by, or at the service of, the intellect.

The Cartesian dualism that posits a dichotomy between mind and body has underwritten much of Western social thought since the Enlightenment through the privileging of rationality and intellect as the most credible site of knowledge production (McNay, 1992) and the subsequent subjugation of the body. According to this view, the individual is a thinking, self-reflective subject, whose actions are governed by their rationality. The mind/body dualism is also profoundly gendered – masculinity has been (and often continues to be) associated with the mind and reason, and femininity with the body and emotion, thus constituting one of the philosophical lines demarcating the exclusion of women from citizenship, society and knowledge production; indeed, the mind/body dualism, together with a number of other key dichotomies (male/female, culture/nature, objective/subjective) embedded within the Western philosophical tradition and

that also arose out of the Enlightenment, has powerfully delineated the parameters of what counts as knowledge and what does not (McNay, 1992).

Feminist theorizing has dedicated considerable attention to critiques of the mind/body dualism, most commonly arguing for a recognition that our bodies are not reducible to nature or biology as pre-cultural categories and that our subjectivities are interwoven with our diverse embodiments (Ahmed, 2000; Butler, 1999). Knowledge, feminist theorizing has taught us, is saturated with power relations, despite the prevalence of the Enlightenment values of neutrality and objectivity which flow from its emphasis on the rational, universal subject.

Feminist critiques have also been usefully extended to show us that this universal subject is also an able-bodied subject, which produces disabled people, like women and other marginalized groups, as inferior in relation to a white, male, able-bodied norm (Garland-Thomson, 1997). The interplay between the individual, knowledge and power is particularly complex for disabled people, for whom subjectivity is at times overdetermined by their embodiment when addressed within the context of dominant ideologies that embed Enlightenment values within social norms.<sup>3</sup> As Rod Michalko argues with respect to blindness:

When qualities such as knowledge and accurate perception are connected to Enlightenment versions of empiricism, rationality, and reality, it is an almost imperceptible move to conceive of sight as a “powerful sense” and of blindness as the negation of such power. Far from being self-evident, therefore, the oppositional relation between sight and blindness is steeped within the power relations at play within the ideological struggle over what counts as reality and what counts as “seeing” and “knowing” it. (2002, p. 108)

The “rationality of opposites” (Michalko, 2002, p. 108) that is epitomized by the mind/body dualism continues to permeate much of Western social thought and the diverse social

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<sup>3</sup> The relation between subjectivity and disabled embodiment can also be understood as a source of insight when taken up as a form of marginalized knowledge and space of resistance (e.g. Davis, 1995).

arenas and practices that emerge from them when philosophy hits the ground. As Butler reminds us, the Cartesian dualism has important social effects – it is not merely an issue of philosophy in the abstract – as it “invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy” (1999, p. 17). To open ourselves up to different ways of understanding and experiencing bodily life, then, constitutes an important intervention into those dominant Western practices of knowledge production which reproduce hierarchies of social difference through their reliance upon understandings of embodiment and subjectivity which are underwritten by the Cartesian dualism of the mind/body split.

Exploring this relationship between embodiment and knowledge production has been more than a scholarly project for me. Although I have long been interested in these issues, my commitment to pursuing them changed when I developed a physical impairment early in my graduate studies that prevented me from writing. Suddenly, there was a great deal at stake. Initially, I was concerned with finding a model of research that attended sufficiently to the work of the body (my body) so that I could continue my studies. But as I sought out such an approach, I began to sense that beyond what so often felt like an experience of closure to me was actually an opening to learn something different than what I had expected to learn.

This insight was not immediately evident, however, and I initially continued to approach the relationship between my body, research and writing in fairly instrumentalist ways, albeit with modifications necessitated by disability. This is the typical way that disability is engaged with in the academy – that is, returning impaired bodies to so-called normal functioning through the use of various assistive devices – and it is an approach which deeply constrains any possibility for insight that embodied difference might offer us (Ferguson & Titchkosky, 2008; see also Overboe, 2001).



Other scholars have described how conventional research methods have constrained their research – and how this experience of constraint has at times thrown it (and them) into crisis – requiring the development of different methodological approaches which open up a space of questioning capable of disrupting taken-for-granted ways of knowing. As Jacqui Alexander writes about her confrontations with research methodology:

I couldn't rely on the knowledge derived from books, not even on the analytic compass that I myself had drawn. Moreover, I had to scrutinize my own motivations for embarking on the project.... In short, I had to begin to inhabit that unstable space of not knowing, of admitting that I did not even know how to begin to know. (2005, p. 294)

And so it was that I came to realize that I did not know how to work *through* the body; I simply knew that something was missing, that there was more. Coming to an understanding of what an embodied methodology could actually be took some time, and I explored a variety of different entry points into embodied writing and knowledge production. For a while, I maintained those lines which traditionally demarcate the boundaries between the work of the body and the work of the mind, and between scholarship and life; I could not initially actualize a way out of these dichotomies.

It was only through radically re-experiencing my body that I realized the potential for embodied knowledge to flow through the body, rather than merely surrounding embodied experience with theory and text, as I had been doing.<sup>4</sup> Slowly, in moments gleaned from bodywork sessions, yoga and mindfulness movement classes, I began to experience the mind and body as more fully integrated rather than discrete functions (Klein, 1997) which positioned the mind as the sole site of knowledge production. By shifting the material and temporal boundaries of my own body such that I could expand my embodied capacity for learning, I have also

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, I very often continue to do this. The bifurcation of mind and body is a deeply held ideology and way of being in the world and working to undo this will be an open-ended process.

expanded my notion of what knowledge production is, and what it can be. It was these moments of felt experience (and often they were no more than a moment) that cultivated in me this sense of possibility and openness.

In this way, my methodology became my subject matter and pain – my original site of inquiry – became the means through which to develop an embodied methodology.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps significantly, this mirrors my process of living with pain. Whereas when I was first diagnosed with a chronic pain condition I felt invested in understanding the pain – the diagnosis, the injury and how to manage it – I came to be less engaged with the pain as a medical (or even empirical) category and generally attend more to working with the pain such that I can live with it differently. I am, in effect, reinterpreting the dominant medicalized discourse surrounding pain in Western society through learning about different health modalities and bringing awareness to my embodied experience of these diverse health and healing knowledges. In life, and in scholarship, this has led me to different experiences and understandings of my body, and of embodiment in general.

Through my participation in embodied pedagogy in the classroom, as well as in a variety of alternative health and body work practices, I have similarly been engaged in a process of re-interpreting my understanding of my own body, and indeed, bodies in general. This process, together with my readings of feminist and disability studies scholarship which underscore the socially produced character of embodiment, has strongly informed the methodology I employ in this work.

My understanding of an embodied methodology is thus firmly located in my own narrative(s), and I have drawn upon feminist autobiographical and autoethnographic scholarship

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<sup>5</sup> I thank Roxana Ng for highlighting this for me.

to support my work. These methodological approaches have been complementary to my development of an embodied writing practice for several key reasons. The first, as I suggest above, is that my development of an embodied writing practice has only been possible through critical engagement with my own body. The second relates to the nature of pain itself. Much has been written about the subjective and individual nature of bodily pain, and the problem of its inexpressibility through language (Scarry, 1985). And yet, it is only through language that pain is accessible to us – whether to ourselves, as sufferers of pain, or to those of us who seek to better understand and theorize it as social phenomenon. If pain is a complex *interpretive* experience that is not only given meaning through the telling of pain but which also gives meaning to these different tellings (Ahmed, 2004), then autobiographical representations of pain have much to teach us about the social production of pain and its implications for subjectivity and embodied knowledge production given their close narrative rendering of this very intimate bodily experience. The third reason is political. Autobiography, and memoir more broadly, reflect a movement away from the production of authorized texts through clinical and professional expertise, and towards the self-representation of marginalized knowledge (Church, 1995; Couser, 1997; Heald, 2004). As Thomas Couser points out, autobiographical narratives of disability and illness make a particular contribution to the genre of autobiography in that they “illuminate the relations among body, mind, and soul” and “foreground somatic experience” such that disability and embodiment are recognized more explicitly as socio-political experiences (1997, p. 12). Autobiography is also consistent with diverse approaches to decolonizing knowledge production, which highlight both the colonial power relations embedded within Western research traditions and the importance of critically intervening in the practices and assumptions that hold these power relations in place (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Watson & Smith, 1992).

However, the move towards self-representation is not without its own attendant risks and I am cautious about simply reinscribing another version of authority based on personal experience which can only lead to further epistemological closure. Because narratives are “assembled to meet situated interpretive demands” any story we seek to tell is both contingent and open-ended (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998, p. 166). In this sense, “autobiography is both impossible and inevitable” in supporting my desire to develop an embodied writing practice (Gannon, 2006, p. 490). Recognizing the tendency towards closure within some autobiographical writing, I want instead to “mobilize the autobiographic” for the purposes of putting it to work for social inquiry (Ang, 2001, p. 24). As Ien Ang suggests, autobiography put to work in this way can help us investigate the social production of subjectivity, emotion and experience through the specificities of time and space while at the same time revealing the contingency of such subject formation. While Ang’s interest is in using autobiography to reveal processes of diasporic identity formation, her approach can usefully be extended to include the idea of bodily identification that I am working with here.

Alongside my own pain narratives, I also take up several autobiographical representations of pain written by other people. I locate all these autobiographical pain narratives – my own and the stories of others – within a wider context of knowledge production about pain through an analysis of different textual representations of pain taken from medicine, other health literature, disability studies scholarship and other cultural texts. Taken together, all these different representations of pain form a kind of larger autobiographical narrative in that they reflect the wide variety of texts that I have encountered as someone living with and working on the subject of bodily pain. Sara Ahmed describes the different texts she brings together as a ““contact zone”” (2004, p. 14), creating an archive formed through her engagement with the multiple spheres in

which she lives and works. As she notes, “I do not simply interweave the personal and the public, the individual and the social, but show the ways in which they take shape through each other, or even how they shape each other” (p. 14). I have similarly drawn on some of the many representations of pain that I have come into contact with (and which I have made contact through) as a way of mobilizing my commitment to allowing for the interchange between scholarship, politics and the everyday.

By analyzing my *encounters* with pain, I am calling attention to the interactive quality of pain when considered as a social phenomenon. As Gannon (2006) observes, autoethnographic writing is risky if seeking to draw upon one’s autobiographical narrative while at the same time destabilizing the very notion of a singular self or narrative. She writes, “It is difficult to write about the self and to be an escape artist from the self at the same time” (p. 484). Treating pain as an encounter – a site of social interaction – helps to destabilize the individualization of pain experience and reveals that pain is socially constituted through the conditions shaping both the emergence of any given experience and our engagement with these experiences.

For example, as I mentioned above, my initial understanding of my experience of pain was framed by medicine, which diagnosed my condition as “Repetitive Strain Injury” or “Chronic Myofascial Pain,” depending on the specialization of the doctor. My orientation to my pain was thus shaped by a medicalized framework that focused upon what to do about it, how to manage it and how to heal it. This lens was further informed by my status as a student and those university bureaucratic structures which required that I represent my disability through a medicalized framework, if I was to access resources and supports that would enable my continued participation in university life. This meant, among other things, securing a medical diagnosis and prognosis, identifying the impacts of this diagnosis on my performance as a

student and developing a plan for treatment, accommodations and assistive devices based on the original diagnosis and assessment of my condition.<sup>6</sup> In all of these ways, my pain was being interpreted and knowledge about pain – my pain – was being produced. Throughout this time, I was both informing and strongly informed by this medicalized knowledge about my pain.

I was at the same time engaged with a variety of alternative health modalities, which offered more holistic ways of understanding pain and its treatment. And yet, even while I accessed these different health resources, and read extensive background literature, my level of engagement remained quite intellectual, as well as instrumentalist in that my primary concern was to identify the cause of my pain such that I might eliminate it. This is a profoundly medicalized approach to pain and health and a good example of how medical power, in the Foucauldian sense, worked to insinuate itself into my relationship with my own body (Foucault, 1980). The consequence of this was that my readings of my own body were underwritten by this relationship in which my (embodied) self was engaged primarily as an object to my (intellectual) self, thus offering no real alternatives to the critiques of medical power and the limits of Western medicine as a healing modality that I became so well-versed in. While I was able to locate these critiques within the context of my experiences of pain and disability, I struggled to find a way *through* the space of critique, and towards a way of engaging with (my) pain that was grounded in my body. The trouble with biomedicine, then, is not so much its way of explaining and treating pain. Rather, the trouble lies in the way medicine – through medical power that

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<sup>6</sup> The medicalization of disability within the University and the tyranny of normalcy that is embedded within Western education more generally have been well documented (e.g., Erevelles, 2000; Hibbs & Pothier, 2006; Ware, 2001).

penetrates many spheres of social life – shapes an objectified relation to our own bodies which functions as a key interpretive framework through which our bodily knowledge is formed.<sup>7</sup>

Pain, it seems, is busily being made and unmade by people and practices that are themselves part of a wider matrix of social relations and institutions that rely upon knowledge as an integral aspect of power in Western culture (Foucault, 1980). Knowledge – seeking to know my pain through those explanatory devices available to me – was certainly integral to my own experience of bodily pain, as this excerpt from a course paper, written several years ago, shows:

There is a gap between most of what I read about pain, and my own experience of pain; at the same time, there is a piece of most of what I read about pain that resonates with me. These pieces do not come together tidily, or easily, and they do not nearly capture my experience of living with chronic-acute pain<sup>8</sup> for the past two and a half years; rather, these fragments provide me with touchstones that usher this pain through into the realm of the real. They have helped me make sense of my experience of living with pain when pain itself can often seem so senseless. My pain is real, but it has often felt unknowable, and unreasonable. While I have tried to describe and interpret it, understand it and work on it, this pain I live with is ultimately elusive and quite unverifiable. (Ferguson, 2007)

I wrote this as part of a larger paper on pain, early in the process of learning to live with – and theorize – pain. As I read it now, I read scientific discourse permeating my thought processes at the time. The notion of “the real” as an essential aspect of knowing is woven throughout this short excerpt, creating a tacit link between the real and the reasoned; that which is real must be verifiable to be true. The narrating of pain in this excerpt, and the larger paper itself, is also shaped by the narrative demands of writing an academic paper on pain; the storying of my experience of pain was shaped by the interpretive practices of composition available to me

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<sup>7</sup> See Willard (2005) for an overview of feminist critiques of biomedicine and the possibilities offered by Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) for transforming the objectified relation characteristic of biomedicine to one in which people are more active participants in their health and bodily experiences.

<sup>8</sup>I thank Kathleen Rockhill for sharing this conceptualization of pain with me, as a strategy for rupturing medicalized designations of pain as *either* chronic *or* acute. This either/or designation can function as a management tool to contain and define the complexities of pain as lived and experienced.

within the academic setting (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). Given the objectivist scientific demand for narrative and bodily coherence shaping my interpretation, there is little room for embodied knowledge – and there is little body appearing on the page in this excerpt and in most of my early writings on embodiment.

As we saw above – and I will elaborate upon this point in the following section – medicine acts as a knowledge regime which lends authority to the experience of pain, from its existence to its effects. This authority is so pervasive that medical discourse underwrites even most social theories of pain. I turn now to interpretive sociology as a way of first revealing the discursive limits of Western knowledge production about pain, and then exploring the implications of this for knowledge production about disability, health and the body more generally.



## Chapter 3: Reading the Body in Pain

My development of an embodied methodology relies upon interpretive sociology, which suggests that we can learn about how power, knowledge and discourse interact with embodiment through an examination of the texts and talk of everyday life. Tanya Titchkosky describes the relationship between embodiment and textual knowledge production in this way:

To know that the body is made manifest through our word-filled relations to embodiment actualized through our reading and writing of the body, is to know that any manifestation of language is an embodied activity that might open us to something other than what appears on the page. Reading and writing are socially oriented activities of embodied actors situated in the same world they are busy making. Attending not only to the sense in which texts give us versions of embodiment, but also to the ways in which we apperceive these versions, can teach us much about the ordering of relations to the bodies of ourselves and others through the medium of everyday texts. (2007, pp. 210 – 211)

This suggests that experiences of embodiment such as pain and disability are firmly located within those cultural contexts that give meaning to those experiences; in reading and writing any bodily experience we necessarily engage in interpretive work that involves the use of wider social narratives through which many different versions of embodiment are constructed. Embodiment is thus an intersubjective phenomenon, accomplished through social interactions and practices which reveal that, as Gail Weiss tells us, “the experience of being embodied is never a private affair” (1999, pp. 5 – 6). I am interested, then, in what bearing this interpretive approach has on the ways we read and write the body in pain, particularly given that bodily pain is most typically characterized as intensely private, subjective and individual by nature.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This is typical of both medicine (e.g. Bonica, 1990) and the humanities (e.g. Scarry, 1985).

As I looked for literature on bodily pain from a sociological or cultural studies perspective, I most often found it in the shadows of various academic disciplines or literatures. These discussions appeared across different fields, including disability studies (e.g., Best, 2007; Hughes & Paterson, 1997; Juarez, 2002; Paterson & Hughes, 1999; Siebers, 2001; Wendell, 1996), sociology of the body (e.g., Leder, 1990; Zaner, 1995), medical sociology (e.g., Baszanger, 1998a, 1998b; Bendelow & Williams, 1995; Freund & McGuire, 1995; Morris, 1998; Werner & Malterud, 2003; Whelan, 2003; Williams & Bendelow, 1998), anthropology of health and illness (Das, 1997; Good et al., 1992; Jackson, 1994) and the humanities (Scarry, 1985; Stoddard Holmes & Chambers, 2005) and medical humanities (e.g., Burns et al., 1999; Frank, 2004; Katz, 2004; Morgan, 2002; Morris, 1991). There are also autoethnographic texts dedicated to the subject matter of living with pain (Greenhalgh, 2001; Heshusius, 2009) and illness narratives which attend to pain as part of a larger experience of living with illness and disability (e.g., Frank, 1991/2002; Mani, 2001).<sup>10</sup>

Reading across different disciplines and social theories of pain usefully reveals the boundaries of our understandings of pain – and, indeed, of embodiment itself. In this chapter, I analyze my reading of pain as a way of both mapping the discursive limits of knowledge production about and of bodily pain and examining the work that pain is doing across these different texts and fields of knowledge. I will show that the medicalization of pain is so deeply embedded within most social theories of pain that medicine and sociology seep into one another, giving shape to pain's representation in everyday life. This medicalization of pain, I argue, is profoundly problematic in that it contains our understandings of human embodiment, illness and

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<sup>10</sup> There is also work on pain as emotion, particularly feminist studies which seek to locate painful feelings within a wider political context (e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2000; Philipose, 2007; Razack, 2007). These studies have informed my analysis of pain in that they offer a methodological approach to expanding notions of pain as only ever biological and individual.

disability within the context of Western scientific knowledge production and the objectified relation to embodiment which flows from it. My project, then, is to intervene in dominant Western relations to knowledge production about and of the body, and thus open up the meanings available to us for the interpretation and representation of bodily pain as a sensory phenomenon. This is particularly important given the prevalence of social scripts in Western society which perceive bodily pain, disability and embodied difference as only ever a sign of limit or lack – of the body gone wrong. The critique that follows, then, seeks also to make room for bodily pain within the space of the political, such that we might engage more critically with our taken-for-granted assumptions about pain and disability, and begin to imagine more complex relations to (our) human embodiment.

In my readings of pain, I insist upon treating it as a social practice accomplished by people who, through their engagements, interactions and locations within particular social spaces – for example, scholarly, institutional, community – come to make meaning of bodily pain. I am thus not so much interested in what pain *is* but rather, *the work it does* (Ahmed, 2004). I have asked, then, what pain is doing in the different texts I examine as a strategy for revealing the epistemological implications of pain's representation.

### ***Mapping Pain and its Representation in Medicine***

The texts I highlight in this chapter were selected to exemplify my critique regarding the dominant characterization of bodily pain as biological, individual and, ultimately, outside the social. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the texts I analyze are not intended to form a complete or coherent review of all writing and social research on bodily pain; rather, they represent my encounters with particular texts that resonated with me given both my own experiences of pain and my academic interest in the subject. Many are also key texts within the

academic literature on pain – widely regarded and much quoted – and as such characterize pain in ways that are often embedded within other theorizing about bodily pain.

My analysis begins with the definition of pain in Western medicine, which I use to situate my argument that biomedical discourse underwrites pain as a taken-for-granted (social) phenomenon. I briefly trace this medicalized understanding of bodily pain and the objectified embodied relation that it secures throughout different literatures that engage with pain as an experienced, sensory phenomenon within particular social contexts. I am especially interested in how pain has been employed and taken up within the field of disability studies, given its political and scholarly commitments to destabilizing normative notions of embodiment, and I conclude with a discussion of the limits to disability studies and other social theorizing about and of pain. I enter my analysis, however, with the word pain itself.

“Pain” can be traced to the Greek and Latin words meaning punishment (Bonica, 1990). The representation of pain through language is thus underwritten by the notion that it is an inherently negative and undesirable response to a transgression of some kind. Similarly, a widely accepted definition of pain provided in a major North American medical textbook describes pain as follows<sup>11</sup>: “Pain. An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms of such damage” (p. 18). In a note following this definition, pain is said to be a subjective experience, and while “it is unquestionably a sensation in a part or parts of the body...it is also always unpleasant and therefore also an emotional experience” (p. 18).

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<sup>11</sup> This definition is also recognized by the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP), which describes itself as “the leading professional forum for science, practice, and education in the field of pain” ([www.iasp-pain.org](http://www.iasp-pain.org)).

This common medical definition of pain clearly reflects both the etymology of the word and dominant social understandings of bodily pain as troublesome and undesirable. While it is acknowledged that pain is more than just a physical sensation through its reference to the emotional dimensions of pain experience – assuming that the physical and emotional body can be parsed apart – pain ultimately derives its explanatory power through its biological facticity in this medical definition. Interestingly, at the same time as medicine claims authority over pain – and even its very existence – this definition gives itself a kind of escape clause when it suggests that pain might only be “*described* in terms of such [tissue] damage” (Bonica, 1990, p. 18; my italics) but can still be diagnosed as pain.

The tenuousness of the diagnostic process in determining and treating pain, and particularly chronic pain, is well-documented (e.g., Kleinman et al., 1992; Wainwright et al., 2006).<sup>12</sup> As Kugelmann (1997) and others have described, scientific theories of pain within Western medicine have undergone several changes, pointing to the indeterminacy of medicine’s explanatory models for understanding pain. In modern times, a major shift occurred when pain ceased to be treated as a sensation – which was the dominant approach to pain until around 1950 – and instead came to be understood primarily through Melzack and Wall’s “gate control theory” (Kugelmann, 1997). Mirroring the shift from biomedical to biopsychosocial approaches to health which recognize individual health not as solely biological but as a complex of interactions between the biological, psychological and social aspects of human life, the gate control theory similarly shifted dominant Western medical conceptions of pain from understanding it as a *signal* to understanding it as a *process* within the human body (Kugelmann, 1997). While the former model understood pain as a physiological reaction to injury mediated by specific nerves

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<sup>12</sup> This tenuousness further insinuates itself in the lack of effectiveness of most medical approaches to treating pain, particularly chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Kleinman et al., 1992).

(Kugelmann, 1997), Melzack and Wall's gate control theory of pain emerged in response to the "puzzle" of pain and the apparently inconsistent relationship between the existence of pain and (verifiable) injury (Melzack & Wall, 1988). This is a pain that acknowledges variety, cultural context, the role of language in describing pain and the impact of personal history on the experience of pain – for Melzack and Wall (1988), all these subjective dimensions to pain refuted any direct relation between injury and sensation, and demanded a new definition and approach to understanding pain itself. This new definition ultimately signaled a key shift away from treating pain as a symptom towards treating pain as an illness unto itself (Baszanger, 1998b).

Medical theories and definitions of pain do not simply reside in medical textbooks, however. Rather, they circulate and make their way into daily life through both medical practices that seek to treat the illness of pain and the many ways that medical discourse permeates different arenas of Western social life. The practice of clinical medicine strongly shaped Melzack and Wall's theory of pain, and a major contribution of the gate control model was the measurement tool they developed to improve the treatment of pain – the McGill Pain Questionnaire – which asks the patient to rate the intensity and qualities of the pain they are experiencing. This questionnaire is widely used as a way of assessing what type of pain a person may be experiencing and is generally regarded as a useful way of bridging the very personal, subjective nature of pain with the objective needs of Western medical treatment regimes (Melzack & Wall, 1982). In shifting pain from a sensation with a singular source within the body to a process with multiple pathways throughout the body, the possibilities for pain treatment were also expanded. In this model, there are two different pathways through which pain may be treated – the first involves intervening in organic structures of the body while the second

involves intervening in mental processes. A wide variety of treatment modalities, including alternative or complementary treatments, were thus legitimated for use in the medical treatment of pain (Baszanger, 1998b).

My discussion thus far regarding the dominant understanding of pain within Western medicine is by no means comprehensive, and has been simplified for the purposes of my analysis, which is primarily interested in the social effects of medicalized notions of bodily pain. What I hope the overview above demonstrates, though, is that pain is a contested space. And yet, despite the indeterminacy of knowledge about pain in Western society, pain remains within the objectivist authority of medical science. Indeed, even when social and cultural theorizing about the body in pain has taken up this contested space, critiquing the impact of medical discourse on the experiences of people who experience pain (e.g., Good, 1992; Greenhalgh, 2001; Jackson, 1994), pain often remains taken-for-granted as a medicalized phenomenon. I want, then, to shift the terrain of critique here and examine what the pain of this common medical description is *doing* such that we might learn something about the epistemology of pain. By attending to the language of pain in the definition above, and the theory of pain and embodiment that it reflects, we can understand how pain gains its sensibility and thus secures its facticity as a medicalized phenomenon.

Pain, the currently accepted medical definition above tells us, needs language to enter medicine; pain needs to be described. Furthermore, as we learned through the McGill Pain Questionnaire, pain needs description through language to be measured and assessed, and thus to be treated. As Whelan argues, “There is no medical way into pain except via patient subjectivity, however much some medical experts may want to minimize the role of subjectivity in medical claimsmaking processes” (2003, p. 477). The act of describing pain, however, facilitates a

slippage between the description of sensory experience that is labeled as pain and the diagnosis of damage that is said to produce the pain. Even when there is no observable evidence of injury, as is often the case, pain is understood by medicine as a transgression of the body; something has *happened* to the body. (This is reminiscent of pain's etymological beginning in language as punishment.) Even while pain is acknowledged to be experiential, emotional and subjective – even while pain requires language and description by an embodied person experiencing that pain – the epistemological move which links pain with physical damage has the effect of securing the body as the body-object. The body-object is the body that is known objectively by science, and thus forecloses other possibilities for knowing the body, and the body in pain. This is one way that medicine works to position itself as science despite its reliance on interpretive practices (Good & DeVecchio Good, 1993).

***Storying Pain: The (De)Medicalization of Pain in Social Accounts of the Body***

The medicalization and objectification of bodily pain by medicine is not, of course, surprising. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, however, the characterization of pain as medicalized and individualized underwrites many social and cultural theories of pain, in ways that implicate wider notions of embodiment, disability and normalcy, and so it is useful to illustrate the workings of medical knowledge about pain as a way of grounding the critique that follows. Even when pain is peopled, however, it often remains firmly within the contours of medicalized understandings of embodiment. I want to turn now to another representation of pain, one which seeks to address the experience of pain in daily life. This description is drawn from a pain management book for people with Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) and reads as follows:

when pain is present, the nature of it varies widely. The pain could be achy or sharp, localized or generalized, constant or intermittent, burning or throbbing. For some, pain occurs only during specific activities...for others it is so unrelenting



that it governs their lives. When present, pain usually becomes the primary focus of treatment. (Damany & Bellis, 2000, p. 168)

Pain is elaborated upon in this description, but it retains its status as an object of medicine in that it is represented through the language of medical diagnosis as something requiring medical treatment. The narrative voice used is authoritative and impersonal as it directs itself towards the less knowledgeable reader: patients. Pain can thus be spoken about and assessed by those who do not experience the pain. While it is acknowledged that pain can be many different things – and can be experienced in specific ways by specific individuals – the different qualities of pain are presented as a series of either/or potentialities. Pain is achy *or* sharp, but it seemingly is not both. Pain also exists as a reaction to certain activities (recall the notion of pain as punishment, above). Pain is represented as traceable, trackable and explainable, and it is once again a uniformly – and yet paradoxically, distinctly – unpleasant sensation to be managed.

The continuities and paradoxes of the different descriptions of pain clearly reveal pain to be an interpreted phenomenon, achieved through complex and often conflicting interactive processes, despite its characterization as an object of medicine and pain management techniques. Notably, the interactions that produce pain are profoundly social – they occur between bodies. Despite the dominant characterization of pain as deeply individual, it is only through engagement with another and with the social that pain is given its meaning as pain. Pain is also both a response to something (punishment, etymologically speaking and/or tissue damage, according to medicine) and requires a response (most often, treatment). Recalling Pronger's (2002) notion of absence and its dialectical relationship to presence, pain requires its absence to make itself present only to demand its absence once again. The demand of its absence is in fact what makes it present.

The subject of pain has also been taken up outside of medicine and medical texts, often in an effort to (re)claim pain experience from medical knowledge and expertise (e.g., Bendelow & Williams, 1995). Within this literature, pain is often theorized in opposition to medical accounts of pain, and tends to be characterized in some consistent ways across this literature – as highly subjective, deeply personal and mediated by culture, for example (Kleinman et al., 1992; Morris, 1991; Scarry, 1985). While the characterization of pain in these ways appear accurate enough, interpretive sociology also tells us that it is important to be attentive to that which appears “accurate” because doing so can point us to the taken-for-granted meanings that underlie a particular social phenomenon.

Reading across this literature on pain, then, usefully reveals a number of conceptual oppositions – pain/suffering, biology/culture and individual/social – that shape social theories of pain, and which ultimately serve to reproduce those other familiar dualisms – mind/body and masculine/feminine, for example – which are so foundational to Western philosophy and scientific thought. In his philosophical reflection on pain, for example, Richard Zaner argues for a distinction between pain and suffering wherein “pain is located within and on our bodies, suffering has to do with loss” (1995, p. 142). And so while pain is the biological experience, the social and cultural context of that experience leads one to suffer pain. Biology is thus positioned as distinct from the social, and the individual who experiences that pain is positioned as distinct from the collective process of meaning-making that constitutes the pain experience in the first place.

Similarly, in their edited collection, “Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective,” Kleinman et al. (1992) implicitly reproduce the distinction between (biological, individual) pain and (social, collective) suffering through their insistence upon examining the

social and cultural contexts of pain experience. Pain, they persuasively argue, is problematically treated by biomedicine as residing solely in the individual and thus ignores the suffering experienced by individuals – suffering which results from the social consequences of living with pain. And yet, despite their conceptualization of pain as “sociosomatic” (p. 9), wherein they powerfully describe pain as a complex embodied experience that flows from social and historical relations, the authors ultimately redraw the line demarcating the individual and the social when they assert the importance of recognizing “the relationship between neurobiological and social psychological processes” (p. 9). Pain in this text is conceived of as a bodily condition that is suffered by individuals and which is only made social through interactions and relationships with the people around them.

The theoretical distinction between pain and suffering is significant because it attempts to secure scientific authority over pain as a biological sensation. Suffering becomes, in effect, the story of pain while the sensation of pain remains just that – pure sensation, somehow separable from the story of pain. The biological facticity of pain is thus reinstated, despite important efforts to locate pain within social and cultural processes of meaning-making. This distinction also serves to contain our epistemological inquiries into embodiment itself – pain is often used as a way to demarcate the materiality of the body, the evidence of some real or true form of purely physical embodiment, outside culture. And yet, I want to argue that pain is only pain, and not something else, through story and the various interpretive devices available to us. By this, I do not simply mean to say that our experiences of pain, like illness, has meaning in our own lives (Kleinman, 1988); rather, I mean to suggest that story and language form the conditions of pain’s appearance. As Morris suggests, “We experience pain only and entirely as we interpret it” (1991,

p. 29; see also Wendell, 1996). There is, then, no pure pain. And in this sense, pain is only pain – only *becomes* pain, perhaps – in the midst of others.

The storying of pain is well-illustrated in Arthur Frank's (1991/2002) classic "illness narrative" in which he chronicles his experience of heart attack and cancer diagnosis in a series of short reflective chapters, one of which deals with the subject of bodily pain. Frank understands pain as "my body signaling that something is wrong" (1991, p. 31). While he clearly articulates this medicalized understanding of pain as troublesome throughout the piece, Frank also mobilizes the autobiographical to acknowledge early on that the experience of pain is quite a different matter to comprehend:

We have plenty of words to describe specific pains: sharp, throbbing, piercing, burning, even dull. But these words do not describe the experience of pain. We lack terms to express what it means to live "in" such pain. Unable to express pain, we come to believe there is nothing to say. Silenced, we become isolated in pain, and the isolation increases the pain. Like the sick feeling that comes with the recognition of yourself as ill, there is a pain attached to being in pain. (p. 30)

The disorder of the body in pain implied by the signal that something is wrong is mirrored in Frank's narrative by the disorder of the life lived in pain – experienced by Frank as a kind of break in the social fold that gives life meaning through its narrative coherence. The livability of life is achieved, Frank seems to be suggesting, through our ability to make sense of our relation to others and to the world around us. He writes:

When the body is healthy, it coheres, its parts work in concert, and it fits into its environment. Lying down, the body finds comfort and rest. Waking, it is ready for activity. In pain the natural rhythm of rest and activity is lost, and that loss leads to further losses of plans and expectations, of a life that makes sense as a fitting together of past and future. Order breaks down, and incoherence takes its place. (1991/2002, p. 31)

Frank describes different ways that life lived with pain led to a sense of isolation and incoherence – the isolation contributing to the incoherence through the sense of disconnection to the social – ultimately sharing that for him, coherence returned through the recognition and expression of beauty around him. While being face-to-face with beauty seemed to evoke a sense of appreciation for the moment he found himself in, it was ultimately in the desire to express his experiences of pain and beauty that Frank found relief from the pain. He was once again in and of the world, and this was meaningful to him: “That night the pain mattered less, not because I dissociated myself from my body, but rather because I associated myself beyond my body” (p. 35). It was not that Frank found the words to describe pain, and thus overcame the common charge of pain’s inexpressibility, but rather that he found words beyond and other than the pain. Frank’s narrative consideration of pain is instructive because he locates pain within the social body, rather than solely within the individual body. In doing so, Frank interrupts the grip of pain as both a sensory and medicalized phenomenon, and shows that the body in pain can be a space of meaning-making much like – and still completely distinct from – any other social phenomenon.

To conceive of pain as a complex intersubjective phenomenon not only disrupts the taken-for-granted assertion that pain is intensely personal (Scarry, 1985), but it relocates pain to the political space of the social. In their phenomenological work on the sociology of impairment, disability studies scholars Bill Hughes and Kevin Paterson (1997) also reject the distinction between pain and politics – in this case, through their critique of the social model of disability. The social model, they argue, rests upon a binary distinction between disability and impairment that reproduces a medicalized relation to embodiment even while the social model sets out to resist the medicalization of disability. Interestingly, this mirrors the complicity I noted above

within sociological accounts of pain that ultimately find recourse in an understanding of pain as biological. Similarly, disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers has warned of the risks of treating pain as a purely individual experience, divorced from the social and political conditions that shape that experience, but ultimately treats this as a theoretical approach distinct from the lived experience that “physical pain is highly individualistic, unpredictable, and raw as reality” (2001, p. 746) – thus reproducing the dominant medicalized understanding of pain as a biological sensation.

### *Epistemological Implications*

Although these are just several examples drawn from many within the literature on pain, disability and the body, I want now to consider the work that pain is doing as it is being theorized, and connect this to the explicitly medicalized representations I provided earlier. Despite efforts to collapse the boundaries between individual and social pain, much of the literature on bodily pain rests upon a distinction between pain and politics, implying that these are categories which could be distinct from one another from the outset. The effect of creating this distinction between pain and politics, or pain and suffering, is to return pain to the realm of biology and further, reify biology as an unmarked, ahistorical category which produces a singular and true version of human embodiment.

There are several epistemological consequences of this theoretical move. First, it participates in the reproduction of the mind/body and nature/culture dualisms which are foundational to Western philosophy. It also reflects the ontological basis for understanding the body. While feminist theory and disability studies scholarship, among others, have made important critical interventions into naturalized theories of the body, demonstrating how embodiment is steeped in culture, most of this scholarship still conceptualizes embodiment

within the parameters of Western epistemology. For example, as I have illustrated, even work which seeks to develop a socially-informed understanding of pain tends to begin with the Western biomedical understanding of bodily pain as troublesome and unpleasant. This suggests that the body itself is similarly understood through a normative Western biomedical framework, with its attending epistemological assumptions regarding subjectivity, the individual, truth and reality, and it follows that theories of the body which emerge from this framework are necessarily underwritten by objectivist scientific discourse.

Another consequence, then, is that our theories of embodiment will continue to secure a Western (dis)embodied, able-bodied subject as long as they take biomedical understandings of the body (and specifically, the body in pain) as self-evident. Taken together, this thread that is woven across different representations of bodily pain risks reproducing the terms of modernist colonial knowledge production, because it negates the existence of diverse conceptions of embodiment which can help us reach across socio-cultural, epistemological and disciplinary borders.

In highlighting the social production of pain I am not seeking to deny or dismiss the painful experience that is pain. Indeed, my work on this subject and my seeking out of different literatures, health knowledge systems and healing traditions was for a long time shaped by my own desire to *not* be in pain. As Mary-Ellen Kelm argues with respect to the relationship between embodiment and the social:

Arguing that the body is a social construction is not to say that the body is unreal but simply that it is unfinished, always under construction by the forces of society and culture. Forces that mold its material form and its intellectual shape (what we think it is) work simultaneously, if not always in concert. (1998, p. xvii)

Similarly, my commitment to locating pain within the social is not to discredit the meanings it holds for people who experience pain. Rather, I want to intervene in those epistemological practices that produce pain as only ever one possible sensation or experience.<sup>13</sup>

I am interested, then, in the epistemological backdrop and consequences of narrating pain as biological and material in a way that positions it as “fact.” This positioning constitutes a form of epistemological closure that effectively secures the authority of Western science and reinstalls the slippage between science and/as medicine, to the exclusion of diverse health and healing knowledges. To narrate pain as biological fact also denies the recognition that we are always already engaged in meaning-making about embodied life itself and that meaning-making is always political, even – or perhaps especially – when meaning masquerades as objective, or that which “just is.” As David Morris writes, “Pain always wraps itself in the meanings we create or accept, even when the meaning is reduced to the impoverished, modernist, biomedical belief that pain has no meaning” (1998, p. 132).

Each of the representations of pain I discussed acknowledged the difficulty of pain; however, the theoretical move made in response to that difficulty was quite different in Frank’s autobiographical discussion of pain. The tension exists, then, not between the different characterizations of pain, but between the representation of pain as an objectified relation to the body and the representation of pain as a lived and intersubjective relation to bodily experience. This is not the kind of tension for which we can, or should, seek resolution. Rather, it suggests that we read pain carefully, and perhaps differently, from those dominant cultural scripts that produce pain as only ever a relationship of bodily difference that is also bodily dysfunction.

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, we know from BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) communities who experience (consensual) pain as generative – a site of eroticism and desire – that pain *can* be otherwise.



This is important because not only does medical discourse delineate the boundaries of knowledge production about pain and the body, but these discursive boundaries also limit the possibilities of critique if we take these boundaries for granted and work within them. Reading texts in ways which uncritically take that text for granted, without engagement with the sociality of that text and our emotional and political attachments and responses to that text mirrors the dichotomous relation between subject and object in conventional social science research methods (Kleinman, 2002). In the chapters that follow, I move towards the more expansive possibilities of critique enabled by a methodology that takes itself as its subject matter.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Writing Bodies: A Phenomenology of Writing**

We write – think and feel – (with) our entire bodies rather than  
only (with) our minds or hearts.

Trinh T. Minh-ha

As Csordas observed some 20 years ago, despite a good deal of scholarly interest in social theories of embodiment, the “body” was still being theorized “without much sense of ‘bodiliness’” (1994, p. 4). This often remains the case. Although the body has come to occupy considerable space within disciplines such as women's studies, sociology and education, among others, theories of embodiment often reproduce normative bodily relations to knowledge production through their emphasis on the body as a site of representation and their reliance upon normative notions of embodiment – rarely, for example, does the ill body, the body in pain, the disabled body appear, and when it does, it is most often as an anomaly or negation. Furthermore, as I argued in the previous section, taken-for-granted cultural assumptions regarding the very nature of embodiment underwrite and thus contain much theorizing about and of the body within an objectivist Western paradigm that dichotomizes mind and body.

In this chapter, I explore how our embodied relations to knowledge production shape the form and content of our writing about bodies and embodied difference. In particular, I use disability and the experience of writing through the disabled body as a space of inquiry that can help us to better understand the social and epistemological consequences of the normative orders of textual knowledge production in the academy. I argue that the body helps to reveal what the myth of Enlightenment social theory and authoritative writing conventions attempt to conceal – that writing is not an individual, solely intellectual process of knowledge transmission, but

rather, is a highly social, intersubjective and embodied set of practices. I begin with a brief discussion of how I use a phenomenologically informed methodology to uncover the meanings of writing in Western social research and education, before turning to my experience of writing through disability as a means of highlighting normative embodied relations to knowledge production and elaborating upon the consequences of these relations. I close with a consideration of the pedagogical implications of writing through disability.

### *Phenomenology and the Body in Social Research*

While I have found social theories of the body, and particularly feminist accounts, indispensable to my understandings of embodiment, health and disability as always already in story, I am also cautious about the limitations, both political and theoretical, of work which employs those scholarly conventions that reproduce a disembodied relation to knowledge production. As Csordas argues of the lack of “bodiliness” when theorizing embodiment:

This tendency carries the dual dangers of dissipating the force of using the body as a methodological starting point, and of objectifying bodies as things devoid of intentionality and intersubjectivity. It thus misses the opportunity to add sentience and sensibility to our notions of self and person, and to insert an added dimension of materiality to our notions of culture and history. (1994, p. 4)

In seeking to develop a writing practice that is more fully embodied, and which might offer a way to destabilize objectified representations of bodily pain, I turned to phenomenology as an epistemological approach that asks us to be attentive to life as it is lived. It is not merely pain that I want to better understand through a phenomenologically informed method, however, but the practices of reading and writing that contribute to knowledge production about the body and bodily pain. So often in the academy – and Western society in general – we treat writing as a mere conveyor of knowledge that arrives on the page already fully-formed. However, writing is

itself integral to the *process* of knowledge production (Richardson, 2004). As such, it is worthwhile to explore those embodied social practices that both support writing as a form of knowledge production and give it meaning.

My understanding of phenomenology draws primarily upon the work of Max van Manen (1990), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1958) and Alfred Schutz (1970), as well as contemporary feminist and disability studies scholarship (Ahmed, 2004; Diedrich, 2001; Paget, 1993; Titchkosky, 2003). Phenomenology grounds analysis within the intersubjective perception and experience of daily life and seeks to understand the social and cultural meanings of these experiences through a kind of bracketing, or phenomenological reduction (Merleau-Ponty, 1958; Schutz, 1970). Methodologically, phenomenology involves sustained reflexive engagement with the research material through an “attentive awareness” to the subject matter, and to the world as it is lived rather than as it is theorized (van Manen, 2006, p. 713). Marianne Paget describes it in this way:

Phenomenological work involves both the subject's experience and the phenomenologist's experience. Experience means that which is lived through, *Erlebnis*. The subject or subject matter is not an object in the sense of a thing. The subject or subject matter is explored through the subjectivity of the phenomenologist who perceives the subject matter, the phenomena, as a dialectical relation between self-understanding and understanding the other. Work in this tradition is reflexive and tacks back and forth between the subject matter and observing the subject matter reflexively. (1993, p. 8)

Meaning is thus co-created, and while it inevitably draws upon multiple histories and subjectivities, it also fosters a kind of reflective present/presence through which insight can be generated. Methodologically, then, the act of attending to the experience of reading and writing the body as we do the bodily work of reading and writing it can, as Titchkosky suggests, “open us to something other than what appears on the page” (2007, p. 210).

Writing itself is a key practice of phenomenological knowledge production, and provides the basis for the practices of description and reflection (van Manen, 1990, 2006; Paget, 1993). As Paget suggests, writing in the phenomenological tradition can allow us to “preserve the poetic and expressive features of life as lived” (pp. 8 – 9). While I am drawn to this rich and multilayered textual practice because it allows for the possibility of destabilizing objectivist academic writing conventions, I also wish to turn it back upon itself to more fully express how writing, and social inquiry more generally, are bodily activities. By attending to my bodily experience of writing, and allowing it to emerge within the text itself, I reflexively explore the ways in which writing often functions as a normative methodological and pedagogical practice within the academy and Western education, and thus reproduces hierarchies of embodied difference through the privileging and denial of particular forms of knowledge. By uncovering the social practices and meanings which support the normative orders of written knowledge production, I hope to open up the possibility of destabilizing those practices and the hierarchies that flow from them.

### ***Writing Through Disability***

Writing is central to Western knowledge production and social science research methodologies; as such, it is a deeply political activity. At the same time as it carries with it a legitimacy reflective of wider social histories of knowledge production, imperialism and domination (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), writing also represents a politicizing space through which to contest, reflect upon and rewrite hegemonic narratives (Mohanty, 2003). While the significance of writing to social inquiry and the possibilities offered by nontraditional forms of writing have been well-documented (e.g., Clifford, 1983; Richardson, 2004), the relationship between the body and our writing practices has been given less attention. Although feminist and disability

studies scholarship, in particular, have moved to redress the mind/body split characteristic of social science research through an acknowledgment of the researcher as an experiencing subject, an examination of the ways in which writing is both a social and a *bodily* activity remains curiously absent.

While I understand writing as a social and cultural practice fully imbued with bodily life, I have not always understood it in this way. As Roxana Ng notes, our bodies are an integral, but taken-for-granted, aspect of our intellectual work, and a rupture in the relationship between our bodies and our scholarship is often required before we become aware of the reciprocal relation between our bodily and scholarly work (2004, p. 4). This rupture, for me, was the acquisition of a physical impairment a year into my graduate studies which profoundly affected my ability to produce written text and participate in academic knowledge production. Disability and its intervention into my experience of typical bodily relations to writing has thus shaped my interest in exploring the possibilities of developing an embodied writing practice – as a political and ethical commitment to both negotiating access and interrogating dominant epistemological practices. I also understand this as part of a larger project of decolonizing knowledge production given that writing and Western social research have been used to secure colonial relations, both historically and in the present-day (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Furthermore, to refuse the mind-body split and allow for the presence of embodied difference within our writing constitutes an important intervention into Eurocentric epistemological practices which serve to secure the authority of particular bodies of knowledge and recognize only particular bodies as knowledgeable.

Disability studies scholarship has taught us that our experience of the world is necessarily mediated by our embodiment, and that this embodiment is itself both socially organized and

constitutive of our relations to knowledge production (e.g., Michalko, 2002; Titchkosky, 2003; Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001). As Jim Swan argues, “the impaired body calls into question the nature of the unimpaired body and the ordinary, taken-for-granted features of its enabling and sustaining presence in thought, perception, and language” (2002, p. 287). I have asked, then, what my embodied relation to writing and those changes to my writing practice brought about by physical impairment reveal about the significance of writing itself. I am especially interested in how the ways we discuss, theorize and practice our writing reflect an imagined body, and bodily relation to written text. If writing is more than simply reporting on something we already know, but rather, a way of knowing more deeply about the world, then our embodied relations to textual knowledge production have both methodological and epistemological consequences. By revealing the meanings and significance we ascribe to writing, and through which its authority is secured, it might become possible to (re)imagine writing as a practice that is genuinely grounded in our diverse embodiments.

Disability has changed (and thus reshaped) my writing in a host of ways. Most dramatically, I now rely upon voice recognition technology to produce written text. This means that I wear a headset, equipped with a microphone, into which I speak my writing; specialized software translates my spoken words into written text. A major consequence of this is that I now write more slowly, and haltingly, than I am accustomed to. I have often commented, with considerable frustration, that it is as if my hands are attached to my brain because learning this new technology I have found it extremely difficult to dictate written text orally. The technology frequently makes mistakes and so I must make corrections; sometimes, what appears on the page bears little resemblance to what I said and if I have proceeded too far I cannot always remember what I intended to write. At other times, the work of making corrections midsentence leads me to

forget my intention for the remainder of the sentence. My writing has also become wordier, and the sentences I produce do not always make sense structurally when I reread my work. In general, the work of putting words to a page can seem to overwhelm the content of what I am writing.

My writing process has subsequently become more organic as I try to engage with these new characteristics of my writing, and I rely more upon editing and revision than I did in the past. There are also other, somewhat more mundane ways that my writing practice has changed. I cannot have music playing in the background, and no one can speak to me while I am writing because the technology picks up other voices and words that are not my own appear on the screen; I therefore cannot take my writing into public spaces. Writing has thus become an intensely private and rigidly structured project, except when I rely upon others to type for me, in which case it becomes quite visible, and rooted in interaction and negotiation.

Disability has provided for me an occasion to reflect upon the social practices and meanings ascribed to writing as a *typical* phenomenon. This is to say that in rupturing so-called normal bodily relations to the production of written text, much can be gleaned about those commonsensical understandings which constitute writing and its place within social theory. I am not so much interested here in an analysis of how disability and assistive technologies constrain my writing and scholarship, but would instead like to proceed by grappling with some of the tensions brought about by my experience of writing *through* disability and impairment as they appear in the description above.



### *Writing as a Social Practice*

It is immediately apparent that writing is a social activity accomplished by people and practices located within those particular environments which require (or desire) that writing take place. The production of coherent and knowledgeable written text, as is the convention in the social sciences, can thus be understood as a social accomplishment that obscures the real conditions of writing as they are lived and experienced by the people doing the writing. While I experienced this most acutely as a consequence of trying to write through disability, this is really the case for everyone, regardless of their relationship to disability, albeit in differently positioned ways.<sup>14</sup> For me, having some aspects of my writing process become further individualized while other aspects became more negotiated made it quite clear how *social* writing really is. Books are read, ideas are exchanged and conversations are had. We go about our days and take in the world around us. We write, we get stuck and we take breaks. We struggle and sometimes we seek out help. A section of writing comes together and our heart rate quickens as we feel a sense of accomplishment. Emails go back and forth. The radio plays. Dinner is made. Other people read our work and comment. And much more. Although it can feel profoundly solitary, writing in fact emerges from our lives as they are lived.

And yet, writing is typically imagined as a private, individual process that is the culmination of knowledge acquisition; ironically, however, it is only through its participation in the social that it can be understood as such. This dominant conception of writing is exemplified within universities through the reliance upon writing as the academic standard by which knowledge acquisition is measured and social science methods texts which locate writing at the end of the research process. These assumptions are also embedded within and operationalized by

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<sup>14</sup> A wide variety of elements shape the experience of writing – language, learning styles, personal histories of writing, disciplinary conventions, access to the time, space and tools to write, values ascribed to writing and the intention and context generating the act of writing (academic, educational, leisure, etc.).

university disabled student services which treat writing as an individualized and primarily technical activity through their emphasis on assistive technologies which return the disabled student body to so-called normal functioning (Ferguson & Titchkosky, 2008).

The dominant conception of writing as a private, individual and technical activity conceals the vast amount of work that writing requires and the whole range of activities that support and produce that writing. In concealing the labour of writing, we negate the bodies doing that writing; indeed, understanding writing as labour adds a material dimension to writing that both vividly reveals its sociality and calls attention to the embodied nature of writing. Recall here the language of work that emerged so strongly in my description of my own writing process: “the work of putting words to a page can seem to overwhelm the content of what I am writing.” While it was the process of relearning how to write due to impairment that generated for me the acute sense of writing as labour, it was the demand to eliminate the lived consequences of that impairment within the text such that I could continue to produce appropriate scholarly work that subjected my labour, and thus my disability, to erasure.

Writing therefore involves a relation between the embodied process of writing and the content, form and shape of that writing. This relation between process and content is made quite apparent through my description above, even while they are positioned as oppositional in my description. Indeed, this was for a long time my common (yet atypical) experience of writing. I described, for example, how I found it extremely difficult to learn to dictate written text, orally. My changed bodily relation to writing required the use of an oral writing process that mediated, and appeared in conflict with, the form and content of my academic writing.

My experience here reveals one way that the production of written text rests upon a presumption of normal bodily relations to written textual production; when those normal bodily

relations are impaired, we may use assistive technologies to redress that impairment so as to continue to produce appropriate and authorized academic texts. The demand to produce this work is, of course, compelling and there are consequences for not producing written work in the academy, or for not producing work that subscribes to particular academic writing conventions. Beyond the demand for the production of particular kinds of text, however, lies a relation between embodiment, text and knowledge production.

Not being able to write, as I was for a time, thus provided a space through which to question the meanings and significance of writing in the academy. Writing through the use of assistive technologies, as I now do, has highlighted for me the entanglement of Western writing conventions and conventional bodies which work together to re-articulate dominant cultural understandings of what counts as viable knowledge and viable life (Butler, 2004), and conversely, what does not. In his analysis of composition pedagogy in the contemporary U.S. corporate university, Robert McRuer (2006) connects processes of identity formation with processes of writing composition, arguing that in the demand to produce a sense of orderliness through writing, the normative conventions of university essay-writing function to conceal both the messiness of the writing process and the diversity of those bodies doing the writing. Just as we work to produce coherent versions of selfhood out of highly indeterminate processes of subject formation, so too do we work to produce coherent versions of what we know, regardless of the many unknowns that haunt the margins of our writing.

While McRuer describes the demand for particular kinds of academic writing as a technique through which our bodies – and especially queer bodies, disabled bodies, bodies of colour and other marginalized bodies – are disciplined, I further understand this as a kind of violence accomplished through the negation of embodied difference and the on-going

(re)production of oppressive social norms. In denying dis-orderly forms of knowledge production (whether oral writing or the “disorganized” student paper) the presence of disabled and other marginalized bodies is also denied; the disorderliness of these bodies and their means of participation in knowledge production makes them an unanticipated and discredited presence within the academy (see also Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2002). And yet, as Titchkosky’s (2008) analysis of the everyday rhetoric used to justify the absence of disabled people at a Canadian university demonstrates, it takes a great deal of work to make absence appear ordinary. Similarly, the normative orders of textual knowledge production which repeatedly demand the production of coherent and orderly texts about a world that seldom ever is orderly (McRuer, 2006) constitute a powerful means of excluding embodied difference from the academy.

Concealing the social practices that support writing as a form of knowledge production also has epistemological consequences. By treating writing as the conveyor of knowledge rather than a participant in a process of knowledge production, writing becomes a form of closure – knowledge is relayed, fully formed and complete. This notion of authoritative social scientific writing emerges from the Western Enlightenment philosophical tradition. Historically, writing conceived in this way has also been part of a project of imperialism and domination, and the primacy of written text itself as a site of knowledge production has played a key role in authorizing on-going colonial relations (Gonzalez, 2003; Smith, 1999). The contemporary emphasis on narrow notions of literacy similarly acts as a way of reproducing dominant social relations by locating “problems” with reading and writing within individuals, rather than as a reflection of social relations and values (Titchkosky, 2008), and thus foreclosing the possibilities of what literacy and knowledge production might be.

The historical and contemporary emphasis on writing as knowledge (and very kinds of writing) suggests that there is a great deal at stake in retaining the authority of the written word and upholding those writing conventions that secure its epistemological authority. Authoritative writing conventions have also been critiqued and resisted, both within the academy and outside it. And yet, even those methodological interventions which allow for subjectivity, partiality and discord within the text ultimately commit social phenomena to theory and through the process of writing create an authorized version of that theory, however contingent. When we characterize writing as a key methodological strategy, or as a way of knowing more deeply, we privilege writing as a form of knowledge production that seeks insight and positions that insight as a fixed object in time and space. While all texts are based in interpretive practice and are themselves open to interpretation, there nevertheless remains the social and historical conditions of their existence; that is, the epistemological authority of written knowledge production in Western culture.

Bringing the body into conversation with our understandings of writing and its relationship to social thought helps to reveal the contingency of the epistemological authority ascribed to written knowledge production in Western society and education. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, disability especially opened up writing as a space of social inquiry for me when I began to “talk” my scholarly writing and grapple with the problems it presented for me. One of my earliest experiences of working orally was actually well before I began to use voice recognition technology. While I was waiting for the software, I could not use my hands and arms to write, but I had papers to produce in order to fulfill my course requirements. After learning of my situation, one of my professors suggested that I replace the written requirement of her course

with an oral paper that I would present to her in person.<sup>15</sup> I was extremely reluctant to try this at first, and actually deferred the course three times in the hopes that the university support services for disabled students would provide the voice recognition technology they were suggesting. However, after a year of waiting and faced with my professor's upcoming sabbatical, I decided to try the oral paper presentation method.

This experience of oral knowledge production and the reluctance that informed my early notions of its value was formative for me. It has shaped my subsequent scholarly commitments and pedagogical practices working with other students with disabilities. It has also provided a meaningful space of reflection upon embodied relations to writing and knowledge production. Oral writing, I have learned, calls attention to writing as an intersubjective process of knowledge production that is saturated with dialogue. Oral knowledge production, as it is understood within indigenous knowledge systems, is profoundly peopled, produces meaning through context and is characterized by indeterminacy (Gunn Allen, 1992; Klein, 2002; Maracle, 1990). As such, orality refuses the containment, fixity and orderliness of writing – and, subsequently, most often lacks legitimacy within the Western academy. Whereas the normative orders of academic writing typically demand that individual authors produce a coherent (and often singular) version of truth as theory, when we speak our writing, knowledge remains contingent and unverifiable – and often in conversation with others. The explanatory power of orality is thus significantly diminished within a modernist epistemological project that requires closure and coherence to secure its authority. The recognition of diverse forms of writing and knowledge production powerfully demonstrates the contingency of those taken-for-granted writing conventions and

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<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Professor Helen Lenskyj for not only making this suggestion as a form of access, but also for insisting upon the academic legitimacy of this method of evaluating the course. Despite my initial reluctance, participating in this oral paper writing experience strongly informed my scholarship and my subsequent professional work teaching writing to students with disabilities.

practices that shape most scholarly writing. In this way, the body reveals what modernist relations to writing attempt to conceal – that writing is highly contingent and deeply social, and that its appearance to the contrary is a myth.

Critique, however, is in some ways the easy part. While I readily accepted my professor's argument that talking my paper was a perfectly legitimate way to complete the course, this acceptance was largely intellectual and I continued for a year to insist that I would prefer to write my paper the usual way. The reluctance I experienced at that time is striking to me today, given my scholarly and pedagogical commitments to actively inviting access by opening up writing and learning as a creative space that desires embodied difference. At the same time, however, I think this reluctance is revealing in that it suggests that those academic writing conventions that attempt to secure an authorized version of knowledge are not simply a set of practices that we can easily disavow if we are simply given the opportunity. Rather, they reflect the strength of dominant epistemological relations and our investments in those relations.

I have continued to grapple with a sense of conflict between my belief in the value of allowing for the presence of embodied difference in my work, and the seductive pull of the conventional in determining how I participate in scholarly knowledge production (even while the conventional itself is no longer a possibility, and nor is it for anyone, ever). Reflecting on this tension, though, I can now appreciate that the locus of this conflict is not really as it initially appeared to be. Whereas I once thought of this as an issue of physical impairment, constraint and the imposition of a technological solution to my disability, I now understand the tension to lie more in the compelling nature of my attachments to producing knowledge and making meaning in very particular ways.

Our attachments are compelling because they orient us to the world (Ahmed, 2004) and allow us to locate ourselves within the social matrix. To disavow our attachments can thus feel risky, frightening even, because it can rupture our sense of connection to the world around us.<sup>16</sup> But still we must, sometimes, disavow our attachments and reorient ourselves to the world such that we might live it anew. In treating writing as a social practice, then, accomplished by people with bodies working hard to write their writing, we create a space for the acknowledgment of both embodied difference and the integral relationship between our bodies and our writing. Indeed, as Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests, “thought is as much a product of the eye, the finger, or the foot as it is of the brain” (1989, p. 39). In recognizing this, we might begin to imagine that writing is accomplished from a variety of bodies and subjectivities, through a variety of means and that it might take a variety of forms.

### *Implications for Writing*

What, then, have I learned from this process of (re)learning to write? Most acutely, I have come to appreciate this inseparability of body, form and content. I have learned to take seriously the value of shifting my focus from outcome to process through practices of de-composition, as McRuer calls them, to enable a more expansive sense of the possibilities for our writing practices:

Critical de-composition...results from re-orienting ourselves away from those compulsory ideals and onto the composing process and the composing bodies—the alternative, and multiple, corporealities—that continually ensure that things can turn out otherwise. (2006, p. 158)

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<sup>16</sup> Pain, as Frank’s (1991/2002) narrative showed us, can sometimes shift our attachments through a breach in our connection to the social – and while I do not believe this is an inevitable or final outcome of the pain experience, this was certainly true for me when pain quite literally prevented me from writing as I understood it (and sometimes still does).



By exploring what I imagine writing to be, I am also more able to recognize and intervene in those disembodied writing practices which uphold the production of disembodied knowledge. In my own work, I have sought to develop an embodied writing practice which allows me to work through disability, rather than against it. This involves a combination of both bodily and textual practices which, taken together, seek to make visible the ways in which embodied difference is always already woven through our methodological, epistemological and political commitments. By characterizing writing as an intersubjective, embodied and deeply social activity, I understand the relationship between the body, disability and writing quite differently than I did five years ago. Whereas I initially experienced writing through disability as an unwelcome (albeit instructive) form of rupture, I now conceive of it as a political and potentially transformative space – a space that holds the capacity to contest the normative demands of Western academic knowledge production and destabilize those epistemological practices which primarily understand the body as something best left behind in the pursuit of intellectual work.

I have used a variety of methodological practices to support my desire to develop an embodied writing practice and actualize my commitment to finding ways to write bodies differently. For example, writing myself and my body into my work has been a key methodological strategy that I have used to contest the normative demands of academic knowledge production. As Laura Ellingson suggests, “resisting the dichotomy of analysis-narrative is a powerful correlate to linguistic resistance of the mind-body split” (2006, p. 307). Weaving together narrative, theory, sensory experience and reflection has thus allowed for the presence of my embodied experience of disability within my writing and also produced writing that values “multidimensionality...texts that turn around and around” as a strategy for

complicating that which we think we already know (Gannon, 2006, p. 488). Similarly, Sharon Rosenberg (2004) calls attention to the *process* of writing and its relationship to knowledge production through her use of a series of “Interruptions” in a chapter on feminist poststructural theorizing. These interruptions create a sense of movement within the text, breaking the illusion of narrative coherence and revealing that writing and knowledge production are contested social practices constituted through various methodological, practical and theoretical decisions. Her strategy is effective, in my view, because it breaks open the taken-for-granted expectation that theory consists of knowledgeable, contained and coherent analysis, an approach which mirrors normative understandings of contained and coherent selves and bodies (McRuer, 2006).

In this chapter, I have tried to weave my way through the many tensions I have come up against as I engaged pedagogically with my experience of writing through disability. Beginning with the understanding that there is something to be learned from exploring the taken-for-granted meanings of a particular social practice, such as writing, I have sought to better understand the social and epistemological consequences of our embodied relations to written knowledge production. To reflexively engage with how writing works as a social practice grounded in historical and contemporary relations which shape its authority is productive because this interrogation can help to interrupt this authority and, I hope, incite us to craft different methodological practices and engage in different conversations. In the next chapter, I move from this space of social inquiry and critique to explore how a writing practice grounded in the embodied practice of mindfulness meditation can help to foster different, and more expansive, ways of understanding the body, and bodily pain.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **(Re)Writing the Body in Pain:**

#### **Towards the Possibility of an Embodied Methodology**

I came to understand pedagogies in multiple ways: as something given, as in handed, revealed; as in breaking through, transgressing, disrupting, displacing, inverting inherited concepts and practices, those psychic, analytic and organizational methodologies we deploy to know what we believe we know so as to make different conversations and solidarities possible; as both epistemic and ontological project bound to our beingness and, therefore, akin to Freire's formulation of pedagogy as indispensable methodology.

M. Jacqui Alexander

My project has been motivated by a desire to animate the body within my writing and research and disrupt taken-for-granted bodily relations to knowledge production as a form of decolonizing methodological practice. Finding a way to do this took some time, however. My commitment to embodied writing – particularly when it involved myself – remained quite intellectual insofar as I did not know how to know through any other means. At the same time, I had a strong sense that the process of working with my body and coming to a different, and more nuanced, bodily awareness was significant to my research and writing practice.

There has thus been a pedagogical dimension to this research and writing process. As I described in earlier sections in this work, my notion of an embodied methodology draws upon Roxana Ng's work on embodied pedagogy, or embodied learning (2000a, 2000b, 2004). Ng (2004) argues that oppressive social relations are upheld by the division between the mind/intellect and body/spirit that is foundational to Western education and knowledge production. This leads to a disjuncture between analysis and practice, or “way of being in the world” (2004, p. 3). Even (or perhaps especially) critical education, with its explicit social justice

agenda, tends to reproduce this disjuncture through its emphasis on critical thinking at the expense of embodied or spiritual understanding (Ng, 2004; see also Alexander, 2005; Orr, 2002). Ng's model of embodied pedagogy seeks to redress this disjuncture through an integrative praxis that highlights Eastern health and meditation practices in the classroom as a way of disrupting the mind/body split and facilitating students' capacity for embodied (self)reflection and critical insight (2004).

Epistemologically, Ng's (2004) model is instructive because it allows for knowledge production about the body to take place through the body, thereby displacing the primacy of objective, scientific ways of knowing. Importantly, it also acts as a critical intervention into Western philosophies of the body by providing a set of alternative theories and practices of the body. In doing so, Ng's model not only reveals that the body is always already a space of interpretation (Butler, 1993) but also locates our social and cultural understandings of the body, and relationships to our bodies, within wider histories of colonial knowledge production. In resisting the mind/body split and offering us an alternative to dominant approaches to bodily knowledge production, integrative pedagogical and epistemological practices are suggestive of the possibilities for decolonizing bodies and bodily knowledge.

It was through mindfulness meditation that I found an embodied practice that helped me cultivate a different way of knowing about the body, through the body. My body. (And this was very important, because it allowed me to reach outside an objectified relation to embodiment and write the body's subjectivity.) Through mindfulness practice, I began to experience my body, and bodily pain in particular, quite differently. My sensory experience has become more nuanced and the boundaries of my perception of my embodiment are more expansive. I am both more conscious of my sensory experience and, because I am more aware of the variety and

changeability of this experience, less invested in it and its (possible) significance. Pain is thus part of a much broader set of sensory experiences than it was in the past.

Knowing that I could experience my body differently has been a profound confirmation that the body is indeed socially produced. While I had previously been committed to this perspective, I now understand this at the level of bodily experience (itself an interpretive process) and not solely as an intellectual interest in social theories of embodiment. Of course, the mind is itself part of the body and part of an embodied process of knowing, and I am cautious here about re-inscribing the same polarity of mind and body that I have been seeking to bring closer together. What was critical to this process of recognizing my capacity to know through the body, however, was that it offered me a practice – a way to *do* embodiment differently, as well as a way to write embodiment differently.

Philosopher Anne-Marie Mol (2002) suggests that we critically reflect upon how bodies are *done* through an analysis of those material practices that shape the experience and interpretation of bodily life. Mol warns of the risk involved in treating bodies as solely a space of interpretation and meaning-making, suggesting that “the body's physical reality is still left out; it is yet again an unmarked category” (p. 11). Methodologically, this insistence upon the materiality of bodily life is important when theorizing embodied experiences such as pain and disability because it thoroughly de-naturalizes any embodied relation and allows for the recognition that theorizing has consequences that must be lived with.

Furthermore, as Mol asserts, “Attending to enactment rather than knowledge has an important effect: what we think of as a single object may appear to be more than one” (2002, p. vii). It is this kind of multiplicity and complexity that I have sought to uncover regarding bodily pain, as a strategy for de-disciplining the ways we experience and narrate our experiences of

pain. While Mol's work addresses medical practices in particular, I believe her approach can usefully be extended to include the many other social practices that produce our understandings and experiences of embodiment. In this chapter, I take up Mol's methodological proposal to explore the possibilities of embodied writing practices that reveal the multiplicity, intersubjectivity and sociality of bodily pain and bodily life. After a brief discussion of mindfulness meditation and its methodological potential, I examine three textual representations of embodiment - an excerpt from Lee Maracle's (2002) fiction book, *Daughters are Forever*, Lata Mani's (2001) disability memoir, *Interleaves* and, finally, my own narrative of working with bodily pain. Although each of these texts approach embodied writing quite differently, they all help to disrupt dominant writing conventions that (re)produce normative notions of embodiment and highlight the socially produced character of bodily life. I conclude with a consideration of how embodied writing acts as a decolonizing methodological practice.

### ***Mindfulness Meditative Practice as Method***

Mindfulness meditation is a central practice within Buddhism, and particularly within the Vipassana tradition (sometimes called Insight Meditation in North America and other parts of the West). While the term meditation actually refers to a variety of techniques developed over centuries, including different forms of yoga and sitting meditation, these practices share among them the aim of cultivating embodied awareness in the present moment (Orr, 2002).

Most simply put, mindfulness meditation is about "paying attention" (Kabat-Zinn, 1990/2005, p. 21). The most common means of mindfulness meditation practice involves using a stable and relaxed seated posture and breath work to ground us in our bodies such that we can be more aware of what we are feeling and experiencing (Rosenberg, 1998). In this way, the practice of mindfulness creates a relationship of "witnessing" oneself and one's body such that it fosters

greater reflective awareness (Zhao, 2006, p. 91). While this practice of paying attention can be developed through dedicated meditation time, mindfulness can also be taken into daily life through the cultivation of attentiveness to common activities such as walking, talking with others, writing, observing the world around us and doing housework.

Mindfulness fosters a kind of attentiveness that aims to interrupt those cognitive thought patterns that lead us to narrate our experiences as we experience them. These “storylines,” as they are often called, are forms of received knowledge, acquired through our individual and social histories; mindfulness practice asks that we suspend what we think we know such that we can experience our bodies and our selves more fully and deeply. There is an emphasis in Buddhism, and within mindfulness meditation, on ending suffering through the practice of interrupting those storylines that cause us to interpret our experiences as one way or another (Tollifson, 1997). As Heesoon Bai explains, “When thoughts are allowed to arise and pass away freely, which is made possible when we do not cling to them and identify with them, then we can catch glimpses of the spacious awareness between and around the thoughts” (2001, p. 92).

Mindfulness also helps to highlight the notion of impermanence – the idea that no particular state is permanent because the world is constantly changing – through heightened awareness of our feelings and sensations. With this heightened awareness, we can clearly perceive the fluidity and variability of embodied experiences. This is particularly helpful when working with feelings or sensations that are generally understood to be troublesome or undesirable, such as pain. Joan Iten Sutherland describes how meditation helped her better understand her experiences of living with a chronic illness:

when I was relatively healthy and my body could be porous, I sank into the great hum of the world, my breath mixing with all the life around me. But when I was heavy with illness and couldn't feel my body's permeability, I stayed with

heaviness. If I was stuck in pain or lightheadedness or hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli, I rested my attention there, and over time I developed an exquisite familiarity with my symptoms and emotional states. I began to be able to call up this attention-without-comment throughout the day, and I tried to cultivate an attitude of curiosity to counterbalance the fear I often felt. I remember walking in my garden when my leg suddenly went out from under me, and I fell in a heap. A few hours later depression came on without warning, but I could see, with awareness cultivated in meditation, that these two seemingly separate events were part of the same neurological storm system, and I was able to weather the depression without taking it personally. (1997, p. 4)

Given its capacity to foster a more dispassionate engagement with pain and a host of other embodied experiences, mindfulness meditation is often used as a health and healing practice in North America, and is increasingly being employed in formal health settings for pain management, stress management and to treat depression (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 1990/2005; Williams et al., 2007).<sup>17</sup> There is also a significant literature on pain, illness and suffering written by Buddhist scholars and practitioners, many of whom write as people living with pain themselves (e.g., Brach, 2003; Cohen, 1997).

While I have not participated in mindfulness meditation within a formal health environment, mindfulness principles inform the body work practices I have engaged in throughout my own experience of living with pain and I have taken up mindfulness practices in my everyday living, as well as in the context of my scholarship. As I described at the beginning of this chapter, mindfulness practice created a way for me to engage with my own body – and my embodied experience of pain – while at the same time being attentive to that experience such that I could expand my interpretive frameworks for understanding it. Because this process dovetailed with my research interest in developing an embodied writing practice, I began to understand mindfulness as a pedagogical practice with methodological possibilities for my thesis research.

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<sup>17</sup> It is often referred to as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) when it is used in clinical health settings.



The practice of mindfulness meditation is consistent with phenomenology given the shared emphasis on reflection, embodied awareness and openness between self and other.<sup>18</sup> Larry Rosenberg, a Buddhist scholar and teacher based in the United States, describes mindfulness as a way of being intimate with the world as we experience our world. When we are mindful, he suggests, the distinctions we tend to create between self and other can dissolve, or become more discrete (1998). Similarly, reflection in the phenomenological tradition is a way of “bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life” (van Manen, 1990, p. 32). As philosophical traditions, mindfulness and phenomenology share a commitment to openness of both the body and thought processes; they are not concerned with reflection as a form of truth-telling but, rather, with the cultivation of a reflexive practice that allows for sustained embodied engagement with and through the world. In this sense, mindfulness can help to achieve phenomenology’s hope for cultivating understanding through the recognition of the inseparability between subject and object, self and other.

Through its emphasis on attending to the breath and sensory experience, mindfulness cultivates a heightened awareness of the interactive relations between our perceptive bodily experiences and the world around us; as such, mindfulness practices are embodied activities. By bringing these practices into the continuum of my research and writing process I have been able to facilitate a kind of embodied reflection that enhances my capacity to reflect critically upon the nature of bodily pain and subjectivity, and thereby better understand at an embodied level how these and other phenomena are socially produced. Methodologically, mindfulness also supports my interest in highlighting writing as an embodied practice because it allows me to work through

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<sup>18</sup> In fact, I began to appreciate the methodological potential of mindfulness practice when the body work I was doing in my conscious movement classes began to resonate with the phenomenology I was reading!

disability, and the pain I experience when writing, to reinterpret that experience such that it opens up the possibility of learning something new. Significantly, mindfulness practice has enabled me to read my own body differently – at the level of sensory experience – such that I could read and write embodiment as produced through complex social processes.

I will now turn to three different narrative examples of writing the body that each in their own way highlights the possibilities of writing the diversity and sociality of bodily life. The first example, from Lee Maracle's (2002) *Daughters are Forever*, is drawn from literature, and while it does not take up mindfulness explicitly, it represents a literary approach to embodied writing that achieves similar ends and which I believe has much to offer for social theorizing about embodiment. Furthermore, it was only through my own engagement with mindfulness practice that I could read the body in this excerpt as a space of interpretive practice that is always already in story and genuinely understand it as such. The next two narratives that I work with explicitly engage mindfulness meditation – I examine an excerpt on bodily pain from Lata Mani's (2001) disability memoir, *Interleaves*, and conclude with an example of my own embodied writing about the experience of bodily pain.

***Imagined Bodies: An Excerpt from Lee Maracle's Daughters are Forever***

Several years ago, I heard Sto:Loh writer and scholar Lee Maracle read an excerpt from her novel, *Daughters are Forever* (2002). The excerpt was about Breath – the breath of a woman named Marilyn, personified and weaving its way through her body during a dream sequence. As I listened, I was deeply moved by how Maracle had written breath and the body as so complexly animate. Here is a little of what I heard that night:

Of its own accord breath flew past secret doorways, small closet spaces in the body where old memories piled up, still, serene and mute. Throat need not have

worried. Breath dared not address these doorways, dared not open them. Breath knew the clutter of memory was dangerous... Breath knows these layers of memory and fear, fear and memory are really wire webs posed to ensnare should the doors be moved, the knots untied. Breath meanders past them, considers them occasionally, nonchalantly, as though they don't really belong inside Marilyn's body. (p. 236)

In the next few pages of the story, breath continues its passage through Marilyn's body, meeting voice, nerves and other aspects of the body along the way – each interaction between breath and body contingent and alive. The body, while formed by history and memory, is also fluid, interactive and very much grounded in the present. Along the way, the story evolves into a description of the body's fear:

It happened so fast. Thin slivers of sound made by nerves communicating terror to her entire body pierced the room. Exploding, they forced blood to pump hard and fast. Everything heated up. Breath shot here and there, looking for Marilyn's voice. Then fear, ugly and lifeless, enveloped itself around the moment, captured her spirit, covered it with a skin of deep purple hues which protected its purity but denied Marilyn access to its impetus, power and governance. The slivers of sound burst into her light. The light reversed itself, retreated to the purple ball. Breath helped the fiery sliver retreat. The blood rushed helter-skelter, pounding against tensed veins, constricted first by shock, then pain. Fear retreated to the spaces between the molecules whose movement was slowest and least essential to the process of aliveness, pulling memory and images of reality along with it. (pp. 238 – 239)

In this excerpt, the experience of fear is vividly revealed to be a complex embodied process as different physiological processes within the body interact with one another. This is brought into being within the text through the movement of the narrative structure and the play of language. This sense of movement and temporal play between past and present also underscores the contingency of bodily experience, suggesting that it could also be otherwise.

In writing the body as animate, Maracle vividly rewrites dominant Western notions of the body which medicalize sensory experience and position the body as an object of human intellect. In personifying different aspects of bodily life, and moving between these different bodily

perspectives, Maracle creates a sense of the body as multiple, intersubjective and constituted through complex relationships between social, physiological, emotional, spiritual and historical processes. A little later, Maracle closes the narrative by acknowledging the interrelatedness of these different aspects of human embodiment:

Marilyn's body knew this. Her mind did not know it, but her body did. Her body, this conservative keeper of the history of pain and doubt, of consequential memories, of action and reaction, so thoroughly useless when disconnected from the mind, heart and spirit, rallied itself even while her swollen lips indulged their sensual imagined pleasure. The muscles of her hips contracted, pulling her abdomen shut, locking the soft, sweet place that is passion's journey's end. Her rib muscles pressed hard on her rib cage, blocking deep breath, satisfying breath, enlivening breath and spirited breath. "Shut down," the body commanded. And those old fatiguing memories of consequence had shut down the fire rising in Marilyn's body. (2002, p. 241)

And so the narrative sequence ends by showing us how the body works with history, memory and the present to manifest sensory experiences such as fear, pain and desire. Bodily pain is represented amidst a diversity of bodily sensations and experiences, and as part of a wider set of processes and interactions – social, physiological and otherwise. This is significant because it is suggestive of both the multiplicity and dynamic quality of pain as an embodied experience, rather than rendering it solely a physical sensation that leaves little room for understanding it as anything other than a medicalized, biological phenomenon (note the singularity of the latter compared to the former).

Recalling Mol's (2002) insistence that we examine *how* the body is socially accomplished, this excerpt helps to demonstrate how narrative practice constitutes bodily perception and experience. While Maracle (2002) draws upon different explanatory modes than a medical account might to illustrate bodily experience, the availability of different accounts nevertheless reveals the sociality of knowledge production about the body through their reliance

upon the interpretive practices available to them. Not all accounts reach the same ends, however. As Rinaldo Walcott argues, it is important to not only interpret the meanings offered by a particular text or set of texts, but to also “decipher their politics” (1999, p. 77). In this case, Maracle achieves an understanding of embodiment that reaches beyond a normative medicalized account of the body as object, and instead puts language and imagination to work in such a way that it highlights the subjective, dynamic quality of bodily life.

Maracle’s (2002) representation of the body’s complex animate nature is thus made possible through her mobilization of the literary to reflect how the body is lived and called into being through story. In facilitating a different narrative possibility for bodily life than dominant Western narratives of the body offer us, this example suggests that there is something to be learned from fiction and the mobilization of the imagination for social theorizing about and of the body. Indeed, just as Avery Gordon suggests that sociology might best understand theory as “fictions of the real” (1997, p. 11) so too might we understand literary fictions as having something to teach us about the social. Perhaps most significantly, though, *doing* the body through fiction reminds us that any narrative representation and the meanings we derive from it are provisional – located in a particular time and space and thus open to contestation and perception.

### ***Mindful Bodies: An Excerpt From Lata Mani’s Interleaves***

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, mindfulness meditation fosters an attentiveness to the present while at the same time revealing the contingency of this embodied present. I now want to work with Lata Mani’s (2001) autobiographical memoir of illness and disability, *Interleaves*, as a way of exploring how the embodied practice of meditation can also allow for a different representation of bodily pain through writing. In this section, I will highlight how

mindfulness meditation can serve to shape an embodied writing practice and thus act as an intervention into those normative writing conventions which position the body as subordinate to (and, in the case of disabled bodies, interfering with) the privileged work of the intellect.

Lata Mani is a scholar, poet and cultural critic. Formerly a professor, Mani sustained a head injury as a result of a major car accident. In her own words, *Interleaves*

is about an individual's journey through the social landscapes of our time, through the ways in which society constructs wellness, illness, success, failure, worth, worthlessness, as these are experienced by one woman attempting to live consciously through the trials and tribulations of brain injury. The social construction of illness meant that the rupture brought about by a physical disability and a medical emergency became also an existential crisis, one in which the broader questions of life and death, pain and suffering, belonging and outsidership had to be confronted every day and, at times, with every breath. (2001, p. 73)

The book is divided into two parts. Part One, entitled “The Journey,” consists of a series of ruminations, as the author calls them, on living with disability and chronic illness. Part Two, entitled “Contemplations” is a series of reflections on seven spiritual principles that the author found helpful as she learned to live through disability, pain and suffering. The book blends narrative, critical reflection and poetry, and makes use of a variety of different stylistic devices throughout.

Mani’s (2001) book is also available as an audio CD, and this format reflects the medium through which the book was written: the spoken word. Mani initially tape-recorded the text and had it transcribed, a writing practice that was necessitated by her embodied relationship to knowledge production. Since her car accident, Mani's cognition occurs through hearing – she has shared in media interviews that she is no longer able to read or engage in sustained, continuous narrative (Rao, 2001). As a result, the narrative structure of the book is quite fluid, comprised as it is of relatively short and often overlapping chapters which, when taken together, explore many

different aspects of the social location of disability, but do not build a comprehensive argument. Instead of offering traceable analytic trajectories or conclusions to anchor the various chapters, Mani shares with readers what she has learned from her experience of disability. However, these pedagogical reflections are themselves provisional because they are grounded in another embodied practice of knowledge production – meditation and breath work.

I now want to examine how the body in pain is being *done* (Mol, 2002) in *Interleaves*, and how this is accomplished through an embodied relationship to knowledge production as it is revealed within the text. The body as something we *do* is highlighted through the emphasis on reflections which have emerged through the embodied practice of meditation; in this sense, key meditation practices such as conscious breath work, observation without evaluation and attachment and being present in the moment can also be understood methodologically. The text moves between description and discussion, but significantly, Mani returns the reader again and again to the present, to the embodied moment of reflection and the open possibilities of that reflexive space. This represents quite a different intention and temporality than the progressive movement of modernist Western practices of knowledge production which gain authority through coherent narrative and emphasize analysis of past events towards the generation of theory and knowledge for the future. In contrast, this text uses a kind of reflective, intersubjective present as a space to consider the workings and sociality of the body, pain and disability. So, while Mani writes of the body, and of *her* body, throughout the text, she consistently writes this body knowledge through her embodied relationship to that knowledge, achieved through meditation practice, and with the reflexive sense that it could also be otherwise. This is exemplified in the following excerpt from Mani, drawn from a chapter entitled “Pain”:

Pain throbs. Pain shreds. Pain darts. Pain weaves sly patterns across the length and breadth of the body. Pain stabs. Pain pulses. Pain plummets the body into a

vortex unknown and at times fearful. Pain nags. Chronic pain drones repetitiously, monotonously, ad nauseam. Pain flays the surface of the skin, turning it almost translucent with frailty. Pain makes one so weak that the whole world is experienced through its omnipresent filter. Pain drains everything into its core. Pain can be as focused as the point of a pinhead or as dispersed as one's consciousness and, if suffered long enough, the pinpoint can seem to grow and swallow one's entire physical being. Pain can be as hard as steel or as soft as a ripe pear. Pain shudders. Pain shivers.

Yet, to speak of pain like this is to suggest that it is an entity, a thing, when it is in fact something very difficult to grasp and hold. For when one does not resist pain so it pools, swirls, finds a crevice in the body in which to stay put, pain is revealed as a diaphanous energy permeable, dissolvable, transformable by breath. Pain, it turns out, is not an ice floe that must be hacked away, but a little pocket of stuck energy that can be released by softening, loosening, relaxing, by conscious breathing. (2001, pp. 26 – 27)

In this passage, knowledge about the body is certainly being produced. But this knowledge, much like embodied life itself, is represented as active, contradictory and suggestive of other possibilities and experiences. This contingency is most clearly revealed through the break in the narrative, and narrative positioning, of pain's description. Whereas the section begins with a direct rendering of pain as an embodied phenomenon, the paragraph breaks and narrative perspective shifts to a reflexive space, mirroring the process of mindfully working with pain as an embodied experience. While the dominant approach to pain understands it as negation and something to manage, suppress and eliminate – something to be “hacked away” – Mani's description suggests that through meditation, or “conscious breathing,” pain can also be something else.

Pain is thus represented as a relationship between people and their bodies and as such is an intersubjective phenomenon – a social activity mediated by the discourses, practices and other meaning-making devices available to us. (This is one way that bodies are *done*.) Mani (2001) also offers us her body work with breath and meditation and in so doing contests medical discourses which seek to categorize, measure and manage pain. (These are two more ways that



bodies are *done*.) Mani thereby writes the complexity, vulnerability and social locatedness of embodied life into her narrative, and her narrative practice – suggesting that one way of contesting those epistemological boundaries which represent bodily pain as somehow outside the social is to shift the very grounds of our theoretical and methodological approaches. (And here are many more ways that bodies can be done.)

### ***Beyond Painful Bodies: My Embodied Narrative***

In trying to develop methodological approaches which reach outside prescribed disciplinary and bodily boundaries, I have sought to enable a politics of pain that genuinely transgresses normative notions of embodiment, health and disability. This was not a straightforward process for me, however. While I produced considerable ethnographic writing about my experience of pain and disability, much of it continued to participate in a medicalized relation to embodiment. Even while I was critical of biomedicine and drew on alternative health knowledge systems, I came to realize that I had simply shifted from one external authority to another as a mode of explaining my bodily experience. In this sense, my embodied relation to knowledge production remained an objectified one, and as such reproduced medicalized discourses of pain and the body.

Mindfulness practice offered me a different way into my body – and also a way to work *through* my body so that it was not merely being put to the service of my intellectual work. Mindfulness practice also offered a way to write my body, and read and write bodily life in general, from an embodied writing space that allowed me to explore different ways of representing bodily pain. I began to shift my relationship to my impairment such that I tried to write through disability, rather than in spite of it; one way of approaching this was to allow

disability to mediate my scholarship. Pain began to appear on the page and the oral character of my writing process emerged more strongly in my work. Here is an example:

*“First, find the pain,” my instructor tells us. “Find those knots, those sticky spots in your body, and bring your attention to those areas.”*

*I do as he suggests and look for the pain in my body. It is not difficult; I have been with this particular pain all day, eagerly (at times desperately) anticipating my evening movement class.<sup>19</sup> Today, pain is concentrated in the area beneath my armpit, on the right side. My neck, too, is gripping and painful. It feels compressed, and I long for the sensation of length, a feeling I have come to realize only after several years of this work.*

I am aware that I am thinking, narrating the experience, rather than giving myself over to my body, fully present. It is still early in the class.

*My instructor continues. Gently, suggestively: “Now, go everywhere but the pain.” I shift my focus and allow my body to reveal itself more fully. As my attention moves to all those places that are not pain, my body releases a little towards its own sense of spaciousness. I feel myself expand slightly – internally, energetically – as my body settles into its fuller being. Those places that feel pain – sometimes knots, sometimes fiery energy, sometimes sharp and searing, but today deep and plodding – immediately have more room.*

Recollection through words will get me no further. I seem to be able to gather the words for my body in pain more easily than the other version of myself I have been cultivating. I decide to try the exercise, here at my desk, and see what happens. (This is one benefit of voice

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<sup>19</sup> I thank Frank Bach for his conscious movement classes and for this exercise in particular.

recognition technology - I can close my eyes, relax my body and write with my voice.) I continue, this time doing the exercise as I write it.

*I ground. I can feel my body – my self – shift, energetically, downwards towards the earth. My weight settles. I let go and hold a little less in my shoulders, in my torso. Fiery masses of pain – seemingly stuck in my neck, my shoulder, my arms – fade a little, out of the foreground. There is movement. Energy feels more dispersed throughout my body, moving through me in channels and flows.*

*My neck lengthens. There is release. My spine lengthens and I grow taller. My body settles and shifts and adjusts. It feels more at ease. The process is gentle. Subtle. Deep inside me. My body knows what to do. The movements come from within; I am not directing them.*

*I expand into space; the distinctions between the lines of my body and the space around me seem to dissolve, for a moment. Then again. And again. Although I can't yet sustain that sense of seamlessness between my body and space, I return to it because I know now how it feels. It is as if I am occupying the full space of my being, beyond the physical boundaries of the body. The lines between my material body and the energetic space around it (me) fade in and out. I feel a kind of expansiveness that connects me to the wider world.*

*I feel clearly that I am much more than my pain.* This sounds obvious. And of course I know it, intellectually. But I did not always know it, and I certainly did not always feel it. To displace pain in this way puts it into a kind of perspective. Throws it into relief. To actually feel around my pain, beyond and through the pain, facilitates a different visceral experience of the pain itself. By shifting and expanding the frame, pain becomes part of an increasingly larger whole and the poignancy of the pain is diminished. By grounding and lengthening, space is

created and there is more freedom of movement in my upper body. *Pain now has space to move, to breathe.* To ease.

As I read what I just wrote, with my eyes closed and my body more grounded and at ease, there are no errors. None. I am astonished, and also not. Typically, I have to continuously edit when I use the voice recognition technology, just to ensure that the correct words appear on the page. Thought and speech must be clearer when I am working mindfully, through my body.

### ***Towards the Possibility of an Embodied Methodology***

Playing with writing the body, I have often experienced a gap between my bodily experience and my narration of that experience. As much as I try to bring body and text closer together, a reach, a gesture, is as close as I get. This is to some extent a problem of epistemology and method – I am trying to bring together different planes of theory and experience which in Western social thought are typically held far apart, positioned as disparate and inconsistent with one another. It is also a difficulty of writing and language, which often – and particularly within the academy – seeks to capture something, fix it in time and space and produce a definitive version of some truth or social phenomenon. And yet, despite the fractures I have experienced in the work of narrating the body in pain, I have actually *needed* language in order to usher bodily pain into the social<sup>20</sup>.

This exposes the profound tension between understanding pain as a social and cultural production and pain as a sensory experience that at some level cannot be theorized away, as long as we are part of the same world we are theorizing. This is a necessary tension, however, in that to resolve it would mean to seek closure through theory and language – something that I hope I

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<sup>20</sup> I have especially needed the language of mindfulness as a way to understand and write pain and the body as an embodied phenomenon.

have shown throughout this thesis is both an impossible and an undesirable project in that it leads to the negation of embodied difference deep within our epistemological practices. Instead, I have sought to “suspend inherited habits of knowing” (Alexander, 2005, p. 310) and cultivate different relations to bodily knowledge production such that I might open up dominant understandings of pain, disability and the body. In this sense, embodied writing constitutes a decolonizing methodological practice through its emphasis on both contesting dominant practices of Western knowledge production and offering a means through which to know differently and more openly, at both personal and collective levels (Graveline, 1998).

To feel pain, to live with pain, to be in pain is almost certainly accompanied by the desire to not be in pain, in this world. I do not wish to question or negate that desire, even while I have tried to unsettle it. What I do desire is that we pay attention to how the body in pain is being accomplished, and what this can tell us about bodily norms and difference and the boundaries of knowledge production about and of the body. While this relation to pain as a desired and potential absence is actually quite present in the narrative above, I read this as a presence-absence dialectic that exists among several different relations to bodily pain. In the excerpt, pain is felt; pain is narrated; pain is written; pain is worded; pain is worked with; pain is held and pain is released; pain is theorized and pain is imagined. Perhaps most significantly, pain is both a part of me and beyond me. Pain, when attended to with mindfulness, is a space of shifting, relational encounters with oneself and others. Pain will always exceed its narration.

Each of the three narrative descriptions of bodily life I have provided in this chapter reveal the contingency and indeterminacy of knowledge production about pain and the body. Just as there were multiple relations to pain in my narrative above, so too were there multiple bodies – my body writing, my body doing a mindfulness exercise, my body telling a story, to name a

few. In attending to how the body is accomplished through different narrative practices, interpretive devices and approaches to language, we can clearly appreciate the multiplicity of the body, both within and between the various excerpts. In grounding the body in the diversity and movement of social life, these different representations individually and collectively refuse the singular authority of medical knowledge. In so doing, they open up the possibility of cultivating bodily knowledge that is also resistant knowledge.

Possibility, however, requires practice to support the actualization of its transformative potential. As Anne Klein writes, “sheer possibility is nothing without movement, energy, and purpose manifested in living beings who, whether they know it or not, are continually bathed in that possibility” (1996, p. 43). Possibility is, then, a pedagogical project that involves deep personal work that is also firmly located within the collective; a project that recognizes the interdependence of different aspects of social and bodily life (Alexander, 2005).

As I described earlier in this chapter, mindfulness cultivates an on-going process of knowing that recognizes the interrelationships between the individual and the world, self and other. In re-orienting ourselves to our bodily knowledge, mindfulness meditation (and other embodied practices which similarly disrupt the mind/body split) offer the possibility of generating not simply new knowledge or critique but, importantly, new ways of being in the world (Ng, forthcoming). The mind/body dualism that privileges the intellect as a primary site of knowledge production is thoroughly entangled with the rise of individualism in the West; epistemological practices which emphasize rationality over embodied knowledge can thus be understood as a means through which ideologies of the individual are embedded within our structures and processes of knowing (Klein, 2004). By enhancing awareness of one’s “inherited habits of knowing” (Alexander, 2005, p. 310) and fostering openness to the other, mindfulness

holds the capacity to generate knowledge that is attentive to the collective well-being of others (Klein, 2004).

An embodied writing practice similarly offers a way of cultivating the openness of possibility and shifting the very grounds of our critiques such that the meanings and experiences of pain, disability and embodied difference might be re-imagined. Indeed, when taken up in the service of social justice, embodied writing can act as a decolonizing methodological approach insofar as it intervenes in those academic conventions which discipline our scholarly and political practices such that colonial discourses of Western modernity retain their grip on our imaginations and our theorizing. By engaging our entire beings in our scholarly work, an embodied writing practice can help to decolonize the tendency towards dualistic thinking that is characteristic of Western social thought and instead allow for the generation of knowledge through “an embodied, living, breathing epistemology” (Gonzalez, 2003, p. 78) that is firmly located within the diversity of social life. Bringing mindfulness together with writing as an embodied practice is suggestive of liberatory possibility, then, insofar as it summons marginalized knowledge and experience (Alexander, 2005) and opens up our writing, and the stories we tell, to allow for the presence of embodied and textual difference.

## Chapter 6: Epilogue

Writing the social profits from the dialogue between what we mean to say and what we discover we have said, and, of course, the work of rewriting to embrace what we find we have said that is beyond or other than our intentions.

Dorothy E. Smith

Above my computer monitor, there is a note to myself that reads, “Remember... *show* don’t tell,” – posted there after several different people suggested this approach to me as a way of writing the body through the body.<sup>21</sup> Initially, I perceived this strategy to be an analytic one – something to strengthen the credibility of my assertions throughout this thesis. I came to realize, however, that it actually represents an important shift in orientation to knowledge production. Whereas much social justice research and writing provides important and compelling critiques of social inequality and power relations, the emphasis on analysis of existing social practices and relations offers little way through dominant social relations. In relocating knowledge production from the primarily intellectual space of critique and the authoritative closure it can invoke to the more embodied space of *not* knowing, we can more clearly appreciate that pedagogy and epistemology are intertwined. In this space, knowledge production is as an open-ended process with genuinely transformative potential.

This re-orientation to my sense of what knowledge production ought to be was ultimately essential to my development of an embodied writing practice as a form of decolonizing. At a practical level, being encouraged to *show* what I meant to say required that I work through

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<sup>21</sup> My thanks to Roxana Ng, Kathleen Rockhill and Josephine Tchong who on different occasions each reminded me of the importance of this.



narrative as an embodied practice – I needed to do what I was suggesting could be done if I was to convincingly find a way through the different spaces of epistemological closure that I found myself pushing up against. Showing instead of telling (or revealing instead of asserting) also allowed me to highlight that writing is a social practice actively engaged in the constitution of knowledge. And, shifting towards an embodied writing space opened up language and the academic vocabularies available for narrating social life such that I could begin to move beyond critique to generate different meanings.

When I moved from the scholarly space of critique to attend more fully to those methodological and pedagogical practices that shape from the outset what we believe we know, I did so with the hope that I could develop an embodied writing practice that would allow me to read and write bodily pain differently than those dominant, medicalized scripts which produce pain as a site of negation – as something to be managed and eliminated. This was motivated by my recognition that pain has functioned as a kind of epistemological threshold in much social theorizing about disability, health and the body, delineating the line between the social and the biological in the context of bodily knowledge production. To maintain this threshold and its medicalized understanding of pain is deeply problematic because it helps to secure the authority of medicine and its claims to biological facticity, and thus leaves little room for the recognition and value of embodied difference within the many spaces and means through which we create knowledge about and through the body.

To recognize the profound social and political consequences for the ways we read, write and talk about pain, disability and embodiment calls for the recognition and cultivation of different ways to think, talk and experience bodily life. My desire to develop different bodily relations to knowledge production has emerged from a political commitment to reimagining

those epistemological practices, and the social relations which flow from them, which constrain and render unviable the many ways of being in the world that are marked by hierarchies of difference. Throughout this thesis, I have highlighted the embodied nature of writing as a way of grappling with the relationship between embodiment and knowledge production, and the methodological and pedagogical consequences of scholarly and educational practices which retain the mind/body split that is foundational to Western thought. This is important because it disrupts the authority of those scholarly and writing conventions which rely upon a normative understanding of social and bodily life, and helps to make visible both the workings and consequences of those conventions. In moving from a space of critique to a pedagogical space which allows for the possibility of developing different relations to bodily knowledge production, I have sought to not merely destabilize those epistemological and discursive practices which understand the body as something best left behind in the pursuit of intellectual work, but shift the very grounds of my critique and its possibilities.

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